The Poisonwood Bible

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BARBARA KINGSOLVER

Barbara Kingsolver was born in Maryland, but she spent most of her childhood in Kentucky. When she was only seven years old, her father, a doctor, moved his family to the Congo, where he worked in the public health sector for many years (this period of Kingsolver's life would form the basis for *The Poisonwood Bible*). Kingsolver studied music at Depauw University in Indiana. She began studying biology toward the end of her time in college, and graduated with a B.S. degree. She later studied ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Arizona. By the mid-80s, Kingsolver was earning a living as a science writer in Arizona. She married in 1985, and had a child two years later, but separated from her husband in 1992. It was in 1988 that Kingsolver published her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, a surprise hit. Kingsolver followed this book with *Animal Dreams* (1990), *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), and *The Poisonwood Bible*, usually regarded as her best novel. Kingsolver continues to write fiction and nonfiction.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Poisonwood alludes to a great many historical events—too many to name in this summary. However, some of the most important would be the rise of 19th-century imperialism, the Cold War, the election and assassination of Patrice Lumumba, and the so-called "Congo Crisis." Throughout the 19th century, the powerful nation-states of Western Europe sent expeditions to other parts of the world, especially in Asia and Africa. Over time, countries like France, England, and Belgium established strong military outposts in these continents, where they harvested the natural resources for their own benefit—essentially stealing the wealth of Asia and Africa from Asians and Africans. In the Belgian colony of the Congo, for instance, Belgians established a colony that was internationally notorious for its cruelty to the Congolese tribes. Rumors circulated (and were later confirmed) of Belgian imperialists cutting off Africans' hands and torturing African babies. By the end of the Second World War, Belgium's presence in the Congo had almost completely ended. But as Belgium prepared to pull out of the Congo, the United States prepared to control the Congo for the first time. The U.S. was eager to exercise political control over the so-called Third World (the underdeveloped countries of the world, largely in Asia, Africa, and South America) in order to maintain a strategic advantage over its rival, the Soviet Union: this struggle for control of the Third World was a crucial aspect of the Cold War between the two superpowers. In the early 1960s, a Congolese leader named Patrice Lumumba rose to prominence in the Congo, promoting an ideology of democracy, socialism, and equality. Because the U.S. government feared that Lumumba's ideas would tilt the country in the direction of the Soviet Union (a Communist state), the Central Intelligence Agency arranged to assassinate Lumumba and replace him with a leader—Mobutu— who would be more sympathetic to American interests. Mobutu wielded power over the Congo for many years, since he was backed by American money and weaponry. But by the 1980s, Mobutu was dying of cancer—as Kingsolver sees it, a symbol of the limited power of the U.S. to influence democracy and freedom in the Congo.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

No novel about Westerners journeying to Africa can help but allude to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1900), still the most influential work of fiction on this theme. And yet where Conrad's novel (which is, like *Poisonwood*, set in the Congo) deals with the legacy of Western imperialism from the point of view of the colonizers, marginalizing and even demonizing the African people, Kingsolver wants to depict the Congolese with sensitivity and respect. In this way, *Poisonwood* draws its inspiration from such contemporary works as *Song of Solomon* (1974) and *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison; *A Bend in the River* (1979) by V. S. Naipaul, and *The Conservationist* (1974) by Nadine Gordimer, all of which examine the legacy of colonialism through a feminist lens.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Poisonwood Bible
- **Where Written:** Atlanta, New York City
- **When Published:** Fall 1998
- **Literary Period:** Post-colonial literature, third wave feminism
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Congo, Georgia, Angola (1960-1980s)
- **Climax:** The death of Ruth May Price
- **Antagonist:** Arguably Nathaniel Price; more generally, though, the forces of capitalism and Western imperialism.
- **Point of View:** The novel switches between many different points of view: those of Orleanna, Adah, Ruth May, Rachel, and Leah Price.

EXTRA CREDIT

No stranger to controversy: As you can probably guess from reading *Poisonwood*, Barbara Kingsolver is no stranger to

political controversy. During the early 1990s, she left the country to protest the Bush administration's decision to wage war in the Persian Gulf. A decade later, she was in the news again for criticizing Bush the Younger's "War on Terror."

Awards!: Kingsolver has won or been nominated for many prestigious honors over the years. She was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for *Poisonwood*, and won the Los Angeles Time Book Award. Possibly her greatest honor, though, is *Poisonwood* being chosen for Oprah's Book Club.

PLOT SUMMARY

The year is 1959, and a Georgian preacher named Nathaniel Price brings his entire family—his wife, Orleanna Price, and his four daughters, Ruth May, Adah, Leah, and Rachel—to the Congo. Nathaniel (Nathan) aims to spread Christianity to the "unenlightened" people of the world, despite the fact that the Congolese already have their own religious traditions. The novel is narrated from the perspectives of the five Price women.

Nathan is a hypocritical, boorish father and husband, and his wife and children secretly resent him. Ruth May, who's only five years old, is terrified by her father, and by his sermons on Jesus Christ. Leah and Adah, who are in their mid-teens, are identical twins, except that Adah suffers from hemiplegia, a blood condition that leaves her unable to control one side of her body. Because speech is difficult for her, Adah spends long chunks of time thinking of elaborate word games, many of them based around satirizing her father's pompousness. Adah and Leah are both highly intelligent, despite the fact that Nathan doesn't entirely approve of educated, empowered women. In spite of her distrust for Nathan's Christian ideas, Leah admires her father's tenacity and drive—nevertheless, Nathan seems not to care much for her. Finally, there's Rachel, the eldest Price daughter, who's superficial and vain, and seems to share her father's contempt for the Africans, with their "ugly bodies" and "dark skins."

As the Prices arrive in the village of Kilanga, Nathan is disgusted by the nakedness of the Congolese, a fact that immediately alienates him from his community. Nathan further alienates himself by arguing that all the villagers should be immediately baptized in the nearby river—despite the fact that the river is infested with crocodiles, and poses a serious danger to children. Nathan acquires a reputation for being murderous and bloodthirsty, as the villagers seem to think that he wants to feed their children to crocodiles. The only thing that endears the Prices to the Congolese is Orleanna's cooking—she bakes an elaborate feast of fried chicken that attracts hundreds of neighbors. Nathan resents Orleanna for being more successful than he in her "recruiting," but Orleanna, a calm, quiet woman, is used to her husband's rage.

Rachel immediately attracts attention from the villagers, due to her beauty and fair complexion. Ruth May makes friends with some of the local children, and teaches them the game "Mother May I?" Adah and Leah are quieter and more reserved—neither makes friends right away. However, Adah is immediately struck by the constant energy of life in the Congo: every animal and plant plays a part in the ecosystem.

Another important presence in the village is Eeben Axelroot, a resourceful man who owns a small plane. At various points, Ruth May notices that Axelroot has access to a radio and to diamonds, suggesting that he's a more powerful man than he seems. In flashbacks, Orleanna remembers a time when Nathan loved her sincerely. This was before Nathan went off to fight in World War II, where his experiences in the Bataan Death March left him deeply traumatized. Orleanna also considers the rise of Patrice Lumumba, a young, charismatic Congolese dictator whose opposition to U.S.-sponsored capitalism has landed him in prison.

As the months go on, Nathan makes little progress in recruiting villagers to his church. Nevertheless, his wife and children become more connected to their new home. One afternoon, Ruth May breaks her arm and Axelroot has to fly her and Nathan to the nearest doctor. At the doctor's, Nathan argues that Lumumba is an "agitator" and a danger to the Congo. Shortly afterwards, the Prices host Nathan's translator and assistant, Anatole Ngemba, for dinner. Anatole is an educated Congolese man, and an enthusiastic supporter of Lumumba—a fact that worries Nathan. Anatole tells Nathan that Nathan has thoroughly alienated Tata Ndu, the leader of Kilanga. Leah admires Anatole for his honesty and intelligence, and she begins to question her father's authority, doubting whether he's as brave and courageous as she'd previously believed.

Ruth May catches a horrible fever, a consequence of her refusal to take her malaria pills for the last six months. Meanwhile, Nathan gets a visit from the Underdown family—a missionary family that helped Nathan get set up in Kilanga. The Underdowns tell Nathan that Lumumba has been released from prison, and is about to become the leader of the Congo. Nathan argues that the Congo was better off when Europeans controlled it. Orleanna thinks—but doesn't say—that Nathan is missing the point: the Congo is in danger now because European imperialists have systematically denied the Congolese education and wealth for decades.

Nathan and Axelroot fly to nearby Stanleyville to find more malaria pills in the hopes that they can cure Ruth May's fever. Shortly afterwards, Nathan and Leah fly to Leopoldville, where they witnesses the inauguration of Patrice Lumumba. Leah begins to spend more time with Anatole, and she helps him teach schoolchildren in the village. Anatole tells Leah about the history of Belgian presence in the Congo, and about his support for Lumumba's brand of socialism. Leah becomes especially conscious of her own whiteness, and feels guilty at being

descended from Europeans who have contributed to misery in the Congo.

Unexpectedly, Tata Ndu asks Nathan for Rachel's hand in marriage. Nathan refuses, and shortly afterwards, Tata Ndu informs Nathan that the villagers have elected to banish Christianity from the Congo altogether. Furious, Nathan continues to preach the Bible, despite the fact that almost nobody listens. Nathan further angers Tata Kuvudundu, the village witch-doctor, by suggesting that Kuvudundu is a charlatan. In the end, the Prices pretend that Rachel is engaged to Axelroot in an effort to discourage Ndu from his courtship.

One night, the Prices awaken to discover an enormous swarm of flesh-eating ants crawling through the village. While Nathan runs away, Orleanna makes sure that her children are all protected. With Anatole's help, the Price children survive. Leah is so moved by Anatole's generosity that she tells him, "I love you." Anatole tells Leah not to say such things. In spite of the discomfort between Leah and Anatole, Anatole continues to look out for Leah. When Leah becomes adept at hunting, Anatole argues that she should be allowed to participate in the villagers' annual hunt, over the objections of Tata Kuvudundu. In the end, Leah is permitted to hunt, and succeeds in shooting an antelope.

Only a few months in Lumumba's regime, the CIA conspires to assassinate him—something that won't be public knowledge for another decade. Lumumba is murdered, throwing the Congo into chaos. On the same day that Lumumba dies, Ruth May is bitten by a snake, and dies almost instantly. Orleanna in particular is devastated by Ruth May's death.

In the aftermath of Lumumba's assassination, life in Kilanga becomes highly dangerous: Lumumba's successor, Joseph Mobutu, is a harsh, dictatorial leader. Orleanna decides that she can no longer endanger her children's lives by continuing to live in Kilanga, so she leaves the community with Leah, Rachel, and Adah. Here, the Price women become separated: Rachel runs off with Axelroot, who promises her wealth and security, and Leah becomes gravely sick, meaning that she's too weak to travel. While Anatole takes care of Leah, Orleanna travels back to Georgia with Adah.

Back in the U.S., Orleanna—still haunted by Ruth May's death—becomes a devoted organizer in the Civil Rights Movement. Adah attends Emory University, and goes on to become a talented doctor. Her experiences in the Congo give her a novel perspective on the relationship between life and death—a perspective that makes her a talented researcher. Adah also begins to regain control of her arms and legs, as her hemiplegia has subsided.

Leah continues to live with Anatole, and over the years, they come to love each other deeply. Anatole becomes increasingly involved in the political opposition to Mobutu, with Leah's full support. While Anatole campaigns and organizes demonstrations against Mobutu, Leah teaches African schoolchildren, often feeling the same deep sense of guilt for her whiteness. Suddenly, Anatole is arrested and thrown in prison. Although she's devastated by this news, Leah continues to teach her schoolchildren, and remains faithful to Anatole. During this time, Leah learns from Tata Boanda, an old friend from Kilanga, that Tata Kuvudundu planted the snake that killed Ruth May.

Rachel marries Axelroot, who gives her wealth and security, but also cheats on her regularly. Rachel gets her revenge by running off with Daniel Dupree, a middle-aged ambassador. Almost immediately after marrying Dupree, she runs off with a much older man named Remy Fairley. Fairley is a prominent hotel owner, and when he dies unexpectedly, Rachel, now in her thirties, finds herself in control of a highly profitable hotel in Leopoldville.

The Price sisters' fates cross again in the 1980s, when they agree to travel through Africa. On the trip, the three sisters come to agree that Nathan was an awful father, but also an important part of their lives. Leah reveals some news she's heard recently: Nathan was executed by the villagers of Kilanga. A child was eaten by a crocodile and Nathan was blamed. At the end of the trip, Leah learns that Anatole has been released from prison, and they reunite, still very much in love. While she's moved by the sight of Leah's reunion with Anatole, Rachel decides that the only purpose of life is to look out for oneself.

As the novel reaches an end, the three remaining Price sisters and Orleanna travel to Africa in the hopes of returning to Kilanga and placing a special gravestone on Ruth May's burial site. They return to the Congo, but are told that Kilanga "never existed." In the Epilogue, Ruth May, speaking from the grave, tells Orleanna that her children love her enormously, and she encourages Orleanna to "move into the light."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Nathaniel Price – Nathaniel Price is the hypocritical, boorish patriarch of the Price family: a proud, arrogant man presiding over a family of women. As a Reverend, Nathaniel sets the plot of the novel in motion when he decides to move his family to the Congo, where he intends to preach the Bible in the tiny village of Kilanga. While Nathan seems to believe in the truth of Bible with great sincerity, his devotion to the specific rules of Christianity—especially the rules of Baptism—make him indifferent to the pains and feelings of the villagers he's supposed to be helping (not to mention those of his own family). Nathan is also presented as a racist and sexist—someone who believes that whites are superior to blacks, and men are superior to women. He treats women and

Africans as children to be condescended to, even when their intelligence and sophistication vastly exceeds his own. In all, Nathan is presented as the embodiment of narrow-minded Western imperialism. His children despise him, although by the end of the novel they come to respect him for his drive and determination, if not for his character and religious beliefs.

Orleanna Price – The quiet, long-suffering wife of Nathaniel Price. Orleanna is a deep-thinking, intelligent woman, but because of her husband's boorish behavior, she's often forced to hide her own talents from others—especially in the Congo. Nevertheless, she feels boundless love for her four children, Leah, Rachel, Adah, and Ruth May, making sure they receive all the food and education they need. When Ruth May is killed by a snake in Africa, Orleanna falls into a deep depression, and never entirely forgives herself. Rather than endanger her family any further, she gathers her children and leaves Africa altogether. She spends the rest of her life devoted to the Civil Rights Movement in the Southern United States—a poignant reminder of her ongoing struggle to forgive herself for Ruth May's death.

Rachel Price – Rachel, the eldest of the Price daughters, is portrayed as a rather narrow-minded, superficial young woman, who dislikes the Congolese more blatantly than anyone in her family except for Nathan Price himself. Unlike her siblings, Rachel makes few, if any, attempts to get to know her neighbors in the village of Kilanga, although her fair skin and good looks lead many in the village to stare at her. After the CIA-sponsored military coup in the Congo in the mid-60s, Rachel marries Eeben Axelroot in order to guarantee her own safety. Over the next 15 years, she marries a string of wealthy, powerful men, who provide for her but give her no spiritual satisfaction. Ultimately, Rachel comes to own a profitable hotel, which again provides her with money but leaves her feeling lonely and unfulfilled. Rachel is arguably the member of the Price family who grows the least over the course of the book: by the end of the novel, she's still self-absorbed and superficial. The only lesson she's learned in her life, she claims, is that the purpose of life is to look out for oneself.

Adah Price – The daughter of Nathaniel and Orleanna Price, and the twin sister of Leah Price, Adah Price is a highly intelligent young woman who's been disadvantaged by the symptoms of hemiplegia, a blood disease that leaves her with limited control of her own limbs. Because Adah has trouble moving, she tends to be quiet and calm. Nevertheless, she's immensely thoughtful and insightful, as we see in the chapters narrated from her point of view. Adah resents her father even more than her siblings do, and she sees his devotion to Christianity as both childish and extremely arrogant. Over the course of the novel, Adah develops a new appreciation for the complexities of nature. Life in the Congo teaches her that everything is connected, and that the life of one species is always tied to the death of another. As an adult, Adah returns to the United States with her mother, where she becomes a world-class medical researcher: her experiences in the Congo give her the perfect impartial temperament for a career as a scientist. Adah also regains control of her body: a symbol of her newfound freedom and autonomy as an adult.

Leah Price – The daughter of Nathaniel and Orleanna Price, and the twin sister of Adah Price, Leah is an intelligent, energetic young woman who over the course of the novel grows into a passionate defender of human rights. When the novel begins, Leah is adjusting to her new life in the Congo, where her father has moved to work as a missionary. She slowly begins to educate herself in the ways of Congolese culture, developing a deep respect for her neighbors' way of life. At the same time, Leah struggles with a strong sense of guilt at being the descendant of Europeans—i.e., the people who enslaved and tortured the people of the Congo for centuries. Leah channels her passion for the Congolese (and, it must be said, her guilt) into a career as a schoolteacher in the Congo. While she continues to feel guilty at being a white American among Africans, she never lets this affect her loving relationship with Anatole Ngemba—an intelligent, equally passionate devotee of human rights.

Ruth May Price – The youngest of the Price children, Ruth May is a plucky, adventurous five-year-old when the novel begins. The chapters narrated from her point of view tend to be short and to-the-point, as there are many times when Ruth May can see, very clearly, what the older and more experienced characters in the book struggle to understand. For much of the novel, Ruth May is dangerously ill, since she refuses to take her malaria pills. Just when she seems to be regaining her health, she's bitten by a snake, and dies suddenly. Ruth May's untimely death sets in motion the events of the second half of the novel: Orleanna's flight from the Congo, Leah's powerful sense of guilt, etc. In the novel's Epilogue, she's presented as a spirit, looking back at her family with love, wisdom, and affection.

Anatole Ngemba – Anatole Ngemba is a young, intelligent Congolese man who eventually becomes Leah Price's lover and husband. Anatole is deeply connected to the history of the Congo: his mother was sent to the Belgian diamond mines when he was still a young child, meaning that his family has been directly torn apart by European imperialism. Because of his family experiences, as well as his considerable self-education, Anatole comes to support the Congolese nationalist movements of the late 50s and early 60s, leading up to the Belgians' decision to pull out of the Congo altogether. He's an enthusiastic supporter of Patrice Lumumba, even after Lumumba's assassination—as a result, he's harassed by the Mobutu state, and eventually thrown in prison for his political convictions. During all this time, Anatole shows great love and understanding for Leah, and in return, Leah loves Anatole unconditionally, even during the years when he's in prison.

Reverend Frank Underdown – A missionary in Africa who

provides Nathan Price and his family with supplies, shelter, and advice about how to get by in the Congo. Underdown is a useful expository device in the novel: whenever there's a big historical event in the Congo, we can count on Frank Underdown showing up to explain it to the Prices—and, by extension, to us as readers. At the same time, the Underdown and his family serve as examples of the corruption and failure of missionary activities in the Congo, living in a mansion with servants rather than living among the people they have come, ostensibly, to serve. After the military coup that leaves the Congo in the hands of Joseph Mobutu, it is Underdown who advises Nathan to leave the country immediately. Nathan stubbornly decides to stay behind, ending his already strained relationship with Underdown.

Eeben Axelroot – A resourceful, devious man who provides the Prices with most of their food and supplies during their time in the Congo—albeit at exorbitant prices. It's strongly implied that Axelroot is involved in the CIA operation to murder Patrice Lumumba, and after Lumumba's death, Axelroot is seen as a powerful, well-connected man in the new Congolese society. Axelroot is last seen married to Rachel Price, who gravitates to Axelroot because he represents safety and security, if not love. Axelroot isn't a faithful husband at all, and after a few years Rachel leaves him for another man.

Tata Ndu – The leader of the village of Kilanga, who often finds himself at odds with Nathaniel Price due to Price's rigid commitments to Christianity. Ndu is shown to be an intelligent, experienced leader, who is far more in touch with the day-to-day lives of his people than Nathan. And yet Kingsolver also makes it clear that Ndu shares many of Nathan's faults: he's plainly a sexist, and cites "tradition" as the reason why women shouldn't be educated or trained. In an effort to make peace with Nathan, he asks to marry Rachel Price—a suggestion that both Rachel and Nathan rebuff angrily.

Tata Kuvudundu – A witch-doctor and Kilanga resident who resents Nathan Price and his family for bringing Christianity—in Kuvudundu's eyes, a dangerous, even poisonous force—to the Congo. Kuvudundu tries to attack the Price family by placing a poisonous green mamba snake near the area where Ruth May plays. Ultimately, this snake bites and kills Ruth May, setting in motion the events of the second half of the novel. Kuvudundu is ostracized from his community when news of his plot comes to light.

Patrice Lumumba – Populist leader of the Congo during the early 1960s, who was assassinated by the CIA due to his outspoken support for socialism. In the novel, Lumumba's sudden assassination is a major turning point in the novel: a symbol of the collapse of the Price's hopes for peace and equality in their new community.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Brother Fyntan Fowles – The jovial, highly educated missionary who preceded Nathaniel Price in Kilanga. Fowles, in spite of their shared religious faith, is everything Nathan isn't: kind, funny, quick-witted, modest, and above all deeply respectful of the Congolese people.

Mama Tataba – An elderly resident of Kilanga who's been paid to take care of the Price family, but leaves when it becomes clear that Nathan Price has no respect for her intelligence or experience.

Janna Underdown – The wife of Reverend Frank Underdown, and a superficial-seeming woman, who makes fun of the Prices for their thick Southern accents.

Mama Mwanza – An elderly resident of Kilanga, who's survived for many years without her legs.

Miss Leep – The elementary school teacher who discovered that Adah Price was extremely intelligent, thereby saving Adah from a lifetime of special education.

Mama Lo – A hairdresser who lives in the village of Kilanga.

Pascal – A young boy who lives in Kilanga, and is later murdered following Joseph Mobutu's military coup in the Congo.

Lekuyu / Nelson – A young boy who lives in Kilanga.

Bud Wharton – Orleanna Price's father, an eye doctor.

Moise Tshombe – The leader of the Lunda tribe, who attempts to secede from the Congo following the Belgians' decision to pull out of the country.

Celine Fowles – The Congolese wife of Brother Fyntan Fowles.

Tata Boanda – An old fisherman who befriends Leah Price and continues to update her on life in Kilanga after she leaves.

Daniel Dupree – Wealthy French diplomat for whom Rachel Price leaves Eeben Axelroot.

Robine Dupree – Wife of Daniel Dupree before he meets Rachel Price.

Pascal Ngemba – Eldest child of Leah Price and Anatole Ngemba.

Patrice Ngemba – Child of Leah Price and Anatole Ngemba.

Martin-Lothaire Ngemba – Child of Leah Price and Anatole Ngemba.

Remy Fairley – Third husband of Rachel Price—a wealthy, elderly businessman, who promptly dies and leaves Rachel in control of a profitable hotel.

Nathaniel Ngemba – Youngest child of Leah Price and Anatole Ngemba.

Bgenye – Son of Tata Ndu.

Therese – Nun who works alongside Leah Price.

President Dwight David Eisenhower – The President of the United States from 1953 to 1961, and one of the masterminds

of the plan to imprison Patrice Lumumba, and later to assassinate him.

Allen Dulles – The head of the CIA during the military coup in the Congo.

Joseph Mobutu – Dictatorial ruler of the Congo during the 1970s and 80s, sponsored by the U.S government because of his support for capitalism.

Muhammed Ali – American boxer who battled George Foreman in Zaire in the 70s.

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Agostinho Neto – Angolan political leader, often seen as a worthy successor to Patrice Lumumba, who was harassed and imprisoned for his political commitments to democracy and socialism.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FREEDOM, GROWTH, AND COMING-OF-AGE

The magazine *The Nation* argues that *The Poisonwood Bible* is, fundamentally, a book about the struggle for freedom in all its different forms. (One could say that Freedom is the overarching theme of the book, while the 4 themes listed below are particularly important cases of the struggle for freedom.) As Kingsolver sees it, everything aspect of humanity—individual people, countries, etc.—participates in a natural process of growth and change that is the essence of human freedom. And yet this natural process of growing, or coming-of-age, is always under attack. In order to understand this, we'll have to ask: 1) whose freedom are we talking about? and 2) under attack from whom or what?

Right away, we're informed that the Price family's freedom is being sucked away by the tyrannical, hypocritical father, Reverend Nathan Price. Nathan takes his family to the Congo to preach the Bible, but he seems not to consider whether or not this is a good decision for his daughters, Ruth May, Rachel, Leah, and Adah; on the contrary, he seems more or less indifferent to what's right for them. Furthermore, Nathan treats all members of his family—not only his daughters, but also his wife, Orleanna—as fools incapable of making their own decisions. For this reason, he forbids them to hunt, explore the village, make friends with the villagers, or educate themselves—in other words, all the things that his wife and children *should* be doing to become freer, stronger, and more mature.

Kingsolver compares the power dynamic within the Price family with a different kind of struggle for freedom, that of the Congo itself. We learn a great deal about post-WWII Congolese history in this novel, and one of the overarching ideas is that the Western world limits the Congo's freedom by keeping its people uneducated and subservient to European and American administrators—essentially, the West refuses to let the Congo "grow up." One of Kingsolver's most important points is that all the exploited people in her novel—whether they're the Price daughters or the Congolese proletariat—have something in common: they're all going through varying degrees of oppression, in which a domineering "father" selfishly refuses to let them come of age. We see this idea come up again and again. For example, when Leah first learns about the Congo's troubled history, her first reaction is to compare the Congo with her own troubled family. (This certainly doesn't mean that Leah understands exactly what the Congolese are going through, but it does suggest that her family situation has trained her to be more sympathetic to the Congolese crisis of the 60s and 70s than most white Americans.)

It's clear enough that the powerful characters and entities in *The Poisonwood Bible*, such as Nathan Price and the United States, want to deny the weak any autonomy or freedom. But ironically, the characters who try to limit others' growth wind up appearing strangely immature themselves—for instance, Nathan Price spends the last 20 years of his life engaged in the same pathetic, failed mission in the same Congolese village. Meanwhile, freed from Nathan's domination, the other Prices attain their own forms of freedom. In each case, the Prices' newfound sense of maturity is tied to their ability to love someone else selflessly; i.e., to respect another person's freedom and autonomy, just as Nathan always denied these things to his wife and children. (The exception that proves the rule is Rachel, who comes to the conclusion that life is about looking out for oneself, but who also winds up feeling lonely and unfulfilled.) By the same token, the Congo region is shown to attain a form of "maturity" as American forces pull out in the late 1980s. The centuries-old conflicts between tribes subsides, suggesting that the Congo may become stronger and safer by adopting a policy of freedom and mutual respect. In this way, Kingsolver steers her novel to an optimistic conclusion: although there are forces trying to limit freedom and growth, many characters find ways to attain their independence nonetheless.

RELIGION AND FAITH

As its title would suggest, *The Poisonwood Bible* studies the way that religion shapes—and at times imprisons—its characters. Nathan Price, the hypocritical patriarch of the Price family, is almost a mascot for

all the ways that religion can go wrong. Yet the novel doesn't condemn religion altogether (it is, after all, a book about missionaries who travel across the world to help the suffering). One could say that Kingsolver is offering two nuanced accounts of what it means to be religious: religion understood as a set of codes, rules, and regulations for human behavior, and religion understood as a kind of "faith"; i.e., a sense of mysticism, selfless love, and connection to others. By contrasting many different forms of belief, the novel comes to suggest that religion—or rather, "faith"—is an inescapable part of life.

One way to construe Nathan's failure as a human being is to say that he's so focused on the Bible's specific teachings about prayer, baptism, etc., that he neglects the "spirit" of Christianity—its emphasis on love, compassion, and friendship. For example, he preaches to a host of Congolese villagers about the importance of baptism, and yet largely ignores his own children, presumably the people who need his love the most. Nathan is also arguably too focused on the supernatural, otherworldly side of religion, in the sense that by talking too much about Heaven and salvation, he ignores the concrete realities of life on Earth. Kingsolver also suggests that Nathan uses religion as an excuse for his own character flaws: because he's a naturally boorish, arrogant person, he uses his religious training to condescend to people whom he regards as ignorant and "un-saved." In all, the novel uses Nathan's character to critique the dangers of religious fervor. Even if religion itself isn't bad, it can always be a dangerous tool in the hands of certain people, because it seems to justify whatever actions they might take, no matter how cruel.

And yet *The Poisonwood Bible* definitely doesn't argue that religion is always poisonous. Brother Fowles, Nathan's predecessor in the Congo, is a kind, intelligent man, whose knowledge of Christianity vastly exceeds Nathan's own. And yet where Nathan stresses a rigid, codified interpretation of the Bible, emphasizing rules and laws, Fowles favors an approach that encourages people to trust their innate sense of right and wrong. Because of his "loose" Christianity, Fowles is dismissed from the mission that sent him to the Congo. And yet we're given every reason to believe that Fowles is a more successful missionary than Nathan—he seems to have made good friends with the villagers, and even marries one of them. Religion can be a powerful force for good, it's suggested, especially when religion is treated as a personal, intimate relationship with the divine—in other words, as faith.

As the novel reaches its conclusion, Kingsolver defines religion and faith more and more abstractly. The characters endure a great deal of tragedy and pain, and in their misery they turn to religion in its various forms. As Adah Price puts it, everyone needs to worship something; otherwise, life would be meaningless. For some, such as Adah, science can be a faith (pretty paradoxically!); for others, such as Orleanna, the Civil Rights Movement is what gives life meaning. As we see, these forms of faith provide people with a sense of peace and a belief in something greater than themselves, and thus they are much closer to Fowles's religion than to Nathan's, because they're intimate, personal, and affirming. Above all, the novel argues that religion has the power to be a force for good *or* evil—but which one depends on the worshipper.

WOMEN AND SEXISM

Many of the characters in *The Poisonwood Bible*, especially Orleanna Price and her four daughters, struggle with society's expectations for how women should behave. On one hand, they have to contend with Nathan Price, who represents one set of sexist social expectations for women (those of the Christian and Western world); on the other, the Price women face the sexism of the Congo, where the vast majority of women have no education, and where it's not uncommon for men to have multiple wives.

One of the basic similarities between these two forms of sexism is the idea that women should be docile and domestic. Nathan Price is reluctant to let his children attend college, because he believes that women should stay in the home, take care of the children, and not have proper jobs or careers. It's clear enough that the villagers of Kilanga believe in the same principle—most of the women in the community are married off by the time they're 10 or 12 (since women's primary purpose is to take care of the house and children, there's no point in waiting around longer to see what kinds of careers they're fit for). Ironically, then, Nathan and the Congolese men have a great deal in common: they subscribe to the same form of sexism. This is especially surprising considering the contrast that Kingsolver draws between the domineering West (represented by Nathan and by the Belgian and U.S. governments) and the exploited Congolese (represented by the people of Kilanga, Lumumba, etc.)—even an exploited culture, it would seem, can still endorse the exploitation of its own women.

Because Kingsolver's protagonists are women, their development over the course of the novel suggests some ways that women learn to fight sexism and misogyny. Interestingly, the Price sisters seem to end up attaining a greater degree of autonomy and power in the Congo than they would have had they grown up in the United States. Because of the fragility of Congolese society (during the course of the novel the government changes hands at least three times) Adah, Leah, Rachel, and even Ruth May are forced into situations where they're forced to lead, teach, control, and fight—in other words, to conform to the *male* stereotypes of their own society. Encouraged by their successes in the Congo, the Price sisters enter adulthood and continue to disrupt sexist expectations. Adah becomes a doctor (traditionally a male-dominated profession) and even Rachel, who seems perfectly willing to play the role of a ditzy, pretty lady, ends up owning her own

successful hotel. Witnessing the collapse of a culture—a sexist, misogynistic culture—teaches the Price children to question *any* culture that orders them to be inferior to men.

RACE, RACISM, AND CULTURE

One of *Poisonwood*'s most important themes is race. The Price family is white, and (prior to traveling to the Congo) enjoys all the conveniences of life as a white citizen in the United States. In the Congo, however, the Prices' new community is defined by black Africans—a novelty for a white American family used to (heavily segregated) 1950s Georgia society. While a few of the Prices (especially Leah, who marries the half-Congolese Anatole Ngemba) make an effort to get to know their African neighbors, racial differences continue to remind the Prices of the broader differences between African and American life, and of the family's perpetual "outsider" status in the Congo.

Unfortunately, many of the white characters in *The Poisonwood Bible* treat their black neighbors with contempt, if not outright hatred. Most of the novel is set before the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, when Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and other important African-American leaders fought for equal rights and legal protections. As a result, many of the American characters have been brought up to treat black people of all kinds—whether they're American or Congolese—as inferior human beings. Nathan Price, the preacher who brings his family to the Congo, thinks of the Congolese as ignorant, "unenlightened" children—a disturbing example of how his Christianity acts as a mask for his racism. But interestingly, the Congolese find the Prices just as strange as the Prices find them. As far as the villagers of Kilanga are concerned, Nathan is a pathetic figure—completely ignorant of how to feed himself or navigate his way through the jungle. In this way, the novel suggests that it's human nature to judge other people based on stereotypes and prejudices—in short, when the Prices stare at the Congolese, the Congolese stare right back. (Although, of course, the power dynamic between the oppressed Congolese and the Prices, who are inherently aligned with the imperialist oppressor, are still uneven.)

Even when the Prices make an effort to understand the Congolese people, they continue to struggle with the hard, cold facts of a history of racial divides. After Leah Price falls in love with Anatole Ngemba and marries him, she's constantly reminded of the fact that she's a white woman living among Africans. Because she's white, everyone can tell immediately that she has European heritage, meaning that she's related by blood to the people who have traditionally kept the Congo impoverished, dangerous, and hopeless. In the Congo, Leah is even more conscious of her own whiteness than her neighbors are; she hates herself for belonging to the same race that has caused her husband and his friends so much pain. And yet as she enters middle age, she takes pride in the fact that she's loved and supported her husband for so many years—and that she's raised a large happy family of boys, none of whom feel the kind of racism that Leah's father Nathan once felt.

In the end, *Poisonwood* suggests that some of the world's deadliest problems—starvation, poverty, civil war—stem from racism. Due to their racial differences, people make no effort to befriend each other or cooperate with one another, and in the end, these differences add up to the huge gap between the First World and the Third World. One way to fight the effects of racism, represented by Leah Price, is with interpersonal love and friendship. Leah and Anatole's relationship certainly doesn't solve the problems of racism that Kingsolver poses in her novel, but it does suggest that one can begin to reverse the effects of racism by starting in the same place where racism begins—two unlike people getting to know one another.

IMPERIALISM

Right away, *Poisonwood* establishes a clash between the Third World, represented by the Congo, and the Western world, represented by Belgium and the United States. The Western world is portrayed as powerful, greedy, and sometimes deceitful, while the Third World is depicted as weak and the frequent victim of other, more powerful nations. This certainly doesn't mean that every American character is deceitful and evil, or that every Congolese character is weak and exploited, but it does point to one of the most important themes in the novel: the influence of imperialism on the Congo.

Kingsolver's novel includes large chunks of real-life history that establish the greed and ruthlessness of the Western world, as evidenced by the way it treated the Congo. For much of the 19th century, Belgium controlled the Congo's industry and natural resources, and forced the Congolese to work like slaves, in conditions that even at the time were internationally condemned for their cruelty. This, as Kingsolver sees it, is imperialism in a nutshell: the systematic control of a foreign land for the benefit of an imperial power (here, Belgium). Following the Second World War, Belgium pulled out of the Congo, but almost immediately, U.S. forces established a "puppet government" in the country. Due to the CIA's actions in the Congo, Patrice Lumumba, the popular, democratically elected leader was murdered and replaced by Joseph Mobutu, a cruel dictator whom the United States supported because of his toleration for capitalism. There are plenty of differences between Belgian and the American imperialism in the Congo (for example, the Belgians' control of the government was direct and unambiguous, while the Americans exerted a huge but still indirect influence on the government, laundering their directions through a native Congolese leader). Nevertheless, Belgian and American imperialists both tried to control the Congo's wealth and resources, ensuring that money would flow back to their own countries. This emphasis on profit, even at

the expense of human rights or justice, is the essence of imperialism—which, as Kingsolver sees it, is just another word for greed.

In a sense, imperialism is the true villain of *Poisonwood*—it's the all-powerful force that murders Lumumba and ignites a civil war in the Congo, endangering the characters' lives. And yet the novel also suggests that imperialism, for all its power, fails in the end. In order to control a foreign country, imperialists have to suppress the citizens of the country itself (in the Congo, for example, imperialists had to kill Lumumba, the popularly elected leader). While it might be possible to do this in the short term, the populace will inevitably rebel—there are simply too many people like Anatole, too many people trying hard to be heard and to struggle against their oppressors. Sure enough, by the end of the novel Mobutu, the puppet leader, is dying of cancer, and American forces are in the process of pulling out of the greater Congolese region. In the end, *Poisonwood* brings us to the optimistic conclusion that imperialism and the doctrine of greed, despite being central to the novel's plot and deeply influential aspects of history, are ultimately less potent forces than they seem.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE HILLS OF SOIL

There's no better symbol for the fallacies of imperialism than the hills of soil that Mama Tataba builds for the Prices' garden in Kilanga. Mama Tataba knows from personal experience that the best way to grow hearty crops is to arrange the seeds with little piles of soil around each one, so that the seeds can withstands the heavy rains. But because of his arrogance, Nathaniel Price refuses to listen to Mama Tataba, and re-arranges the garden as soon as Mama Tataba is done with her work. When the rains come and Mama Tataba is proven correct, the hills of soil become a sinister symbol for the foolishness of the Western colonizers who arrived in Africa and ignored the African people's experiences and ideas altogether.

METHUSELAH

Methuselah, the parrot who Brother Fowles kept during his time in Kilanga (and who later becomes a pet for the Price family), is a complicated symbol. At times, he symbolizes the captivity in which the Price women find themselves. Like the bird, they're imprisoned: forbidden from learning, hunting, or joking by their harsh, tyrannical father. At the same time, Methuselah symbolizes the fate of the Congo itself: when Patrice Lumumba becomes the ruler of the country, Adah Price finds that Methuselah has gotten "free," but also has been eaten by a predator. Similarly, Lumumba is also leading his country into an uncertain future—one that will include much tragedy.

"BANGALA"

The English-speaking characters in *Poisonwood* learn a number of Congolese words, such as "bangala." But "bangala" can mean two different, even opposite things: pronounced one way, it means "good," but pronounced slightly differently, it means "poisonwood." Thus, when Nathan Price preaches to the Congolese, he inadvertently makes them think that Jesus is a dangerous person. In this way, "bangala" is a symbol for the cultural barriers between all people, and of how easily even well-intentioned imperialism and "missionary work" can be twisted into cruelty.

THE BOW AND ARROW

The bow and arrow are a traditional symbol of female empowerment (dating all the way back to the ancient Greeks, who worshipped Artemis, the bow and arrow-toting goddess of the hunt). Thus, it's appropriate that Leah Price gets a bow and arrow around the same time that she's also learning to distance himself from her overbearing father, and to become her own independent self.

THE OKAPI

The first—and last—important symbol in the novel is the okapi; the strange animal that Orleanna witnesses during her walk through the jungles of the Congo. As befits such an important symbol, it resists easy interpretation: at first, it seems that the okapi—an exotic African mammal, once thought to be mythical—is a symbol for the Congo itself, in all its mystery and strangeness. But as the novel goes on, and Kingsolver keeps returning to the animal, it begins to seem that the okapi is more like a symbol for the lives of the characters. Throughout the book, we're encouraged to wonder whether there's any "silver lining" to the tragedies of the story—Lumumba's assassination, Ruth May's death, Anatole's imprisonment, etc. Yet it's also suggested that tragedy must always coexist with joy: every cloud has a silver lining. This is the conclusion that Adah Price comes to during her time as a biologist and a medical researcher. In the end, the okapi brings home this point in a memorable way: we're informed that because of Orleanna's interaction with the animal, it runs away and ends up avoiding a hunter's gun, thereby living for a few more years. In this way, it's implied that even the smallest and most trivial of encounters may have some hidden significance. Ultimately, then, the okapi is a symbol for the importance of all

life, and of the unpredictability of the world.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Perennial edition of *The Poisonwood Bible* published in 1999.

Book 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

God says the Africans are the Tribes of Ham. Ham was the worst one of Noah's three boys: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Everybody comes down on their family tree from just those three, because God made a big flood and drowneded out the sinners. But Shem, Ham, and Japheth got on the boat so they were A-okay. Ham was the youngest one, like me, and he was bad. Sometimes I am bad, too.

Related Characters: Ruth May Price (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Ruth May Price, the youngest of the Price children, describes the attitude of her father, Nathaniel Price, toward Africans. Nathan has decided to bring his family with him to the Congo, where he plans to do Christian missionary work. In spite of his devotion to Christian evangelism, Nathan seems to have little respect for the African people he hopes to "save"—indeed, he says that inferiority and sin are in their blood. The Biblical story of Ham, which Ruth May summarizes here, says that Ham—the youngest of Noah's sons—was a disobedient, dark-skinned boy. To punish Ham for his disobedience, God cursed Ham's descendants. Over the centuries, Ham's curse has been regularly cited as a justification for slavery and imperialism—people have argued that black people "deserve" their subjugation because God wants them to be punished.

Although Ruth May never explicitly says so, it's clear that Nathan's beliefs are bigoted and absurd. Ruth May doesn't quite realize it, but she interprets the story of Ham in such a way that she seems to identify with Ham: she thinks of herself as a bad child. In other words, Ruth May takes a story that's supposed to justify racism and cruelty to black people and interprets it as a story about identification and sympathy.

Book 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

"Nakedness," Father repeated, "and darkness of the soul! For we shall destroy this place where the loud clamor of the sinners is waxen great before the face of the Lord." No one sang or cheered anymore. Whether or not they understood the meaning of "loud clamor," they didn't dare be making one now. They did not even breathe, or so it seemed. Father can get a good deal across with just his tone of voice, believe you me. The woman with the child on her hip kept her back turned, tending to the food.

Related Characters: Nathaniel Price, Rachel Price (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Nathan and his family have arrived in the Congo. There, they're welcomed into the Congolese village where they'll remain for the next two years. Yet when Nathan is asked to say a few words to the villagers, his first instinct isn't to extend his gratitude—instead, he uses his platform to rail against the Congolese way of life. Nathan attacks the villagers for their nakedness, implying that by refusing to wear clothes, the villagers are being sinful.

Nathan's speech tells us a few things about the kind of man he is. First, it's clear that Nathan is a strict, fundamentalist Christian: he has a rigid, unyielding understand of right and wrong—one that plenty of pious Christians would disagree with. Second, Nathan's speech shows that he has no talent for leadership or politics—instead of trying to get the villagers on his side or show them any respect, he immediately treats them like naughty children. He's so sure he's right that he doesn't care how many people he offends (and doesn't even care to learn the language of the people he's supposed to be "serving").

Book 1, Chapter 6 Quotes

Several days later, once Father had regained his composure and both his eyes, he assured me that Mama Tataba hadn't meant to ruin our demonstration garden. There was such a thing as native customs, he said. We would need the patience of Job. "She's only trying to help, in her way," he said.

Related Characters: Nathaniel Price, Leah Price (speaker), Mama Tataba

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Early on in their time in the Congo, the Prices set to work planting seeds on their property. Nathan—a boorish, tyrannical man—refuses to take any advice from Mama Tataba, an experienced Congolese woman, even after Tataba points out that Nathan is planting seeds the wrong way. Tataba insists that Nathan should makes piles of soil to protect against rain—Nathan, who's been planting seeds since he was a child, insists that Tataba is wrong. When Mama Tataba deliberately re-plants every single seed in the garden, Nathan condescendingly says that Mama Tataba is just "trying to help." Nathan is a pompous, arrogant man, who thinks he's far more talented and competent than he really is. He "forgives" those like Tataba who try to help him, not realizing how good their advice really is. In a broader sense, one could say that the passage is a metaphor for the way that the continent of Africa was managed for many years: ignorant colonial leaders from the U.S. and Europe governed the Congo and other countries, convinced that they knew what was best for Africa, but actually doing more harm than good.

Book 1, Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ Once in a great while we just have to protect her. Even back when we were very young I remember running to throw my arms around Mother's knees when he regaled her with words and worse, for curtains unclosed or slips showing—the sins of womanhood. We could see early on that all grown-ups aren't equally immune to damage. My father wears his faith like the bronze breastplate of God's foot soldiers, while our mother's is more like a good cloth coat with a secondhand fit.

Related Characters: Nathaniel Price, Leah Price (speaker), Orleanna Price

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Leah Price paints a tragic picture of life in the Price household. Nathan is the only man at home, but he's also in charge—and he has a rigid, sexist view of domestic life. The result is that whenever his wife or daughters do anything wrong, he's quick to yell at them or even hit them for their "sins of womanhood." Leah, her mother, and her siblings must join together to protect themselves from Nathan—and yet at this point, Leah still admires and loves her father greatly.

The passage closes with an interesting analogy; Nathan's faith, it's implied, is proud and militaristic. From what we've seen, Leah is right on target: Nathan is aggressive in his faith, and seems to think of himself as being superior to the people around him. Orleanna, Nathan's wife, is a religious woman, but she doesn't rub her religion in other people's faces, and she seems to have some objections to Christianity (it fits her second-hand, suggesting that she's only remained a Christian because of her family and her husband).

Book 1, Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ "That road," said our mother, bemused, gesturing with a lazy bent wrist out the window. "Why, I can't imagine." She shook her head, possibly not believing. Can she allow herself not to believe him? I have never known. "It was at the end of a dry season, Orleanna," he snapped. "When it's hot enough the puddles dry up." You brainless nitwit, he did not need to add.

Related Characters: Nathaniel Price, Orleanna Price, Adah Price (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

This passage offers a good example of the way that Nathaniel belittles his family and keeps his wife "in line." When Orleanna asks a natural question, Nathan shoots back with an angry, irritable reply, sending a clear message that Orleanna should keep quiet.

It's interesting to consider that while Kingsolver's novel is full of scenes like this one, in which Nathan uses words in an almost violent way, there's no actual domestic violence in the novel. Kingsolver suggests that Nathan does the greatest damage to his wife and children by making them doubt their own intelligence and competence—snapping at them again and again until they've been trained to be quiet and obedient.

Book 2, Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ The likes of Eleanor Roosevelt declared we ought to come forth with aid and bring those poor children into the twentieth century. And yet Mr. George F. Kennan, the retired diplomat, allowed that he felt "not the faintest moral responsibility for Africa." It's not our headache, he said. Let them go Communist if they feel like it. It was beyond me to weigh such matters, when my doorstep harbored snakes that could knock a child dead by spitting in her eyes.

Related Characters: Orleanna Price (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95-96

Explanation and Analysis

Here Orleanna, reflecting on her time in the Congo, thinks about the United States's relationship with Africa. Years before, when Orleanna and Nathan were both in the Congo, the U.S. had a conflicted relationship with Africa. Some diplomats believed that foreign aid to the continent would be pointless, while some like Eleanor Roosevelt pointed out the country's moral responsibility to help the Third World. It's important to note that Kingsolver portrays women as being more sympathetic to foreigners' pain than men—an idea that generally plays out in the novel.

For the time being, Orleanna sees no real connection between her own situation and that of the Africans—in other words, there's no experiential overlap between her life and the Congolese villagers'. Over the course of the novel, Orleanna will reevaluate her relationship with the Congo, seeing a great similarity between the Congolese sense of helplessness and submission and her own.

Book 2, Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ The boys said, "Patrice Lumumba!" I told Leah that means the new soul of Africa, and he's gone to jail and Jesus is real mad about it. I told her all that! I was the youngest one but I knew it. I lay so still against the tree branch I was just the same everything as the tree. I was like a green mamba snake. Poison. I could be right next to you and you wouldn't ever know it.

Related Characters: Ruth May Price (speaker), Leah Price, Patrice Lumumba

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Ruth May describes the Congolese enthusiasm for Patrice Lumumba, the young, charismatic leader who rose to become the President of the Congo before his assassination. Here, nobody has any idea that Lumumba is going to die—as far as the Congolese are concerned, Lumumba is a savior. (In real life, Lumumba was an extremely popular leader, famed for his brave opposition to Western colonialism in Africa.)

And yet although neither Ruth May nor we know that Lumumba is doomed, there's plenty of foreshadowing that unfolds upon a second reading of the novel. Lumumba's danger is paired with the image of Ruth May as a green mamba—a very venomous snake. (Later on, Ruth May will die from a mamba bite on the same day that Lumumba is assassinated, emphasizing the connection between their fates.)

Book 2, Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ Anatole leaned forward and announced, "Our chief, Tata Ndu, is concerned about the moral decline of his village." Father said, "Indeed he should be, because so few villagers are going to church." "No, Reverend. Because so many villagers are going to church."

Related Characters: Nathaniel Price, Rachel Price, Anatole Ngemba (speaker), Tata Ndu

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nathan Price begins to quarrel with Tata Ndu, the leader of the Congolese village where Nathan has been sent to practice missionary work. Although Nathan sees himself as doing God's work, Ndu thinks of Nathan as a nuisance, making the villagers lazy and putting their lives in danger.

The passage reinforces a point that was already obvious: Nathan is oblivious to the fact that most of the villagers don't care about his religion in the slightest. From their perspective, Christ is just another god to worship, and is even inferior to the gods already celebrated in the village. Nathan, so blindly devoted to his work (to the point where he doesn't spend time with his family), is genuinely surprised that Christianity has become so unpopular in the village, to the point that it is even seen as a bad influence on the village's morals. The fact that he's so surprised suggests

that he's been a bad missionary, refusing to pay any real attention to his audience's feelings.

Book 2, Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ Father said, "An election. Frank, I'm embarrassed for you. You're quaking in your boots over a fairy tale. Why, open your eyes, man. These people can't even read a simple slogan: Vote for Me! Down with Shapoopie! An election! Who out here would even know it happened?"

Related Characters: Nathaniel Price, Rachel Price (speaker), Reverend Frank Underdown

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Nathan clashes with Frank Underdown, his sponsor and (often reluctant) supporter. Underdown tells Nathan and the rest of the Prices that there will be some sudden, potentially dangerous changes in the Congo: the Belgians are pulling out of the country altogether, and there may well be democratic elections in the Congo within a few months. Nathan—as condescending as ever—refuses to believe that there will ever be elections in the Congo. Based on what he's seen in his village, the Congolese are too foolish and disorganized to ever support a democratic movemen—they can't even communicate a simple political message to one another.

Nathan's position is almost nonsensical—he's ready to believe that the Belgians are pulling out of the country, but he sees no reason to believe that the Congolese have the wherewithal to replace their overlords with any other leadership. In short, Nathan seems to believe that the Belgians, with all their cruelty and hypocrisy, were the best thing for the Congolese, because they provided law and order that the Congolese could never provide for themselves.

Book 2, Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ Set upon by the civet cat, the spy, the eye, the hunger of a superior need, Methuselah is free of his captivity at last. This is what he leaves to the world: gray and scarlet feathers strewn over the damp grass. Only this and nothing more, the tell-tale heart, tale of the carnivore. None of what he was taught in the house of the master. Only feathers, "without the ball of Hope inside. Feathers at last at last and no words at all.

Related Characters: Adah Price (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Book II of the novel, Adah discovers that Methuselah, the talking parrot that the Prices have kept as a pet in their new Congolese home, has been "freed" from his cage and eaten by a carnivore. Adah muses on this, and how it relates to ideas of freedom and hope (quoting an Emily Dickinson poem in the process).

It's important to keep in mind that Kingsolver is paralleling Methuselah's "liberation" with the Congo's. Just as Methuselah is being exposed to the elements after a lifetime of imprisonment (and then is promptly eaten), so too are the Congolese being allowed to run their own government after nearly a century of subjugation to the European powers. Yes, the Congolese are "free," but as we'll see, freedom can cause almost as much pain and suffering as subjugation. (Kingsolver certainly isn't suggesting that the Congolese *should* have remained under Belgian rule; she's just foreshadowing the problems the newly liberated Congolese will encounter in the future.)

Book 3, Chapter 26 Quotes

❝ My downfall was not predicted. I didn't grow up looking for ravishment or rescue, either one. My childhood was a happy one in its own bedraggled way. My mother died when I was quite young, and certainly a motherless girl will come up wanting in some respects, but in my opinion she has a freedom unknown to other daughters. For every womanly fact of life she doesn't get told, a star of possibility still winks for her on the horizon.

Related Characters: Orleanna Price (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

In the prologue to Book 3, Orleanna thinks back on her early life before she met Nathan. As a young girl, Orleanna lost her mother; yet she doesn't think of her mother's death as a great tragedy. Rather, Orleanna thinks of being motherless as a gift: a motherless woman, she suggests, is

"free."

There's a lot to unpack here. First of all, it's important to note that Orleanna *is* looking back on her childhood: there's a sad, melancholy tone here, the tone of an older woman thinking back on her mistakes. Second, we should note that Orleanna is trying to see the "bright side" of life: instead of treating her mother's untimely death as a life-ruining tragedy, she thinks of the advantages of being motherless. Orleanna is experienced with finding silver linings: when she analyzes the changes in the Congo, for example, she refuses to accept tragedies as tragic—instead, she tries to find the hidden blessing. Finally, Orleanna's thoughts in this passage suggest her guilt about the way she's treated her own children: i.e, the fact that she sees motherlessness as an advantage suggests that she sees her own relationship with her children as being negative. As we'll see, Orleanna blames herself for allowing Ruth May to die and for being a poor role model for her daughters.

Book 3, Chapter 28 Quotes

❝ Then there is batiza, Our Father's fixed passion. Batiza pronounced with the tongue curled just so means "baptism." Otherwise, it means "to terrify." Nelson spent part of an afternoon demonstrating to me that fine linguistic difference while we scraped chicken manure from the nest boxes. No one has yet explained it to the Reverend. He is not of a mind to receive certain news. Perhaps he should clean more chicken houses.

Related Characters: Adah Price (speaker), Nathaniel Price

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Adah points out a translation problem. The word "batiza" means "baptism"—therefore, it's very important to Nathan, who has come to the Congo to baptize as many African children as possible. And yet "batiza" can also mean "terrify" if pronounced slightly differently.

Notably, Adah has only learned the difference between the two "batiza"s by spending time with the native Congolese. Nathan, who for all his interest in baptizing the Congolese, doesn't seem to like them or respect them at all, has remained ignorant of the finer points of Congolese language—and his arrogant aloofness guarantees that he can't communicate with his congregation. The ambiguity in the word "batiza" also symbolizes the way that religion and ideology can be twisted from something pure into something corrupt and wicked.

Book 3, Chapter 33 Quotes

❝ But where is the place for girls in that Kingdom? The rules don't quite apply to us, nor protect us either. What do a girl's bravery and righteousness count for, unless she is also pretty? Just try being the smartest and most Christian seventh-grade girl in Bethlehem, Georgia. Your classmates will smirk and call you a square. Call you worse, if you're Adah.

Related Characters: Leah Price (speaker), Adah Price

Related Themes:

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Leah Price struggles with her Christian faith. Leah—who's always been Nathan's biggest fan—has learned from her father to work hard studying the Bible. But Leah also knows that studying the Bible doesn't count for much among her peers. No matter how pious and well-studied she is, her classmates in Georgia treat her like a square—all they care about is how pretty she is.

In short, Leah is beginning to doubt the lessons her father has always taught her. Although Nathan claims that Christian faith is sufficient to let a woman into Heaven, Leah has begun to notice that Nathan—and, for that matter, everyone else in her life—doesn't judge women according to their Christian faith at all. Nathan treats women like second-class citizens, no matter how learned or pious they are. Leah begins to realize that Christianity doesn't go far enough in addressing sexism. Eventually, Leah will turn to politics and the radical left as a way of addressing the bigotry of her society.

Book 3, Chapter 35 Quotes

❝ Nelson squatted on his heels, his ashy eyelids blinking earnestly as he inspected Mother's face. Surprisingly, she started to laugh. Then, more surprisingly, Nelson began to laugh, too. He threw open his near-toothless mouth and howled alongside Mother, both of them with their hands on their thighs. I expect they were picturing Rachel wrapped in a pagne trying to pound manioc. Mother wiped her eyes. "Why on earth do you suppose he'd pick Rachel?" From her voice I could tell she was not smiling, even after all that laughter. "He says the Mvula's, strange color would cheer up his other wives."

Related Characters: Orleanna Price, Adah Price, Lekuyu / Nelson (speaker), Tata Ndu

Related Themes:

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tata Ndu, the leader of the Congolese village where the Prices live now, has asked for Rachel's hand in marriage. The Prices are shocked by Ndu's request, not least because Ndu already has many other wives. Here, Orleanna and Nelson laugh about the absurdity of the situation. Nelson points out that Ndu wants to marry Rachel not because he loves her, but because her skin and hair color will complement that of his other wives.

The passage is important because it reminds us of the sexism in Kingala—a parallel to the sexism in Nathan's own household. Evidently, Ndu thinks of women as objects to be collected, rather than people. Orleanna, even though she laughs at the absurdity of the situation, becomes serious as she contemplates Ndu's "desire" for her daughter. Orleanna's aim is always to protect her children, and here she realizes that her child is in danger of being"bought" by the sexist leader of the village.

Book 3, Chapter 43 Quotes

My knees plunged, a rush of hot blood made me fall. A faintness of the body is my familiar, but not the sudden, evil faint of a body infected by horrible surprise. By this secret: the smiling bald man with the grandfather face has another face. It can speak through snakes and order that a president far away, after all those pebbles were carried upriver in precious canoes that did not tip over, this President Lumumba shall be killed.

Related Characters: Adah Price (speaker), Patrice Lumumba

Related Themes:

Page Number: 297

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Adah Price discovers something shocking. Eavesdropping on Axelroot, the secret American agent who lives in the village, Adah learns that President Eisenhower is planning to assassinate Patrice Lumumba, the democratically elected leader of the Congo. (In real life, Eisenhower was supportive of a military coup in the Congo. He believed that Lumumba, a suspected socialist, would be more sympathetic to the Soviet Union; wanting to avoid an African alliance against the United States, Eisenhower had Lumumba murdered and replaced with a pro-U.S. dictator.)

Adah can't believe that Eisenhower—whose popular image is that of a kind, grandfatherly old man—is secretly capable of ordering the murder of innocent people. On a more symbolic level, Adah's surprise in this scene reflects her general distrust of patriarchy in general, whether that of Eisenhower or Nathan himself. The image of respectability and trustworthiness that strong, authoritative men project is often an illusion, concealing hypocrisy or duplicity.

Book 4, Chapter 49 Quotes

Oh, it's a fine and useless enterprise, trying to fix destiny. That trail leads straight back to the time before we ever lived, and into that deep well it's easy to cast curses like stones on our ancestors. But that's nothing more than cursing ourselves and all that made us. Had I not married a preacher named Nathan Price, my particular children would never have seen the light of this world. I walked through the valley of my fate, is all, and learned to love what I could lose.

Related Characters: Orleanna Price (speaker), Nathaniel Price

Related Themes:

Page Number: 324

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Orleanna thinks about the tragedies that have hurt her family, and the nation of the Congo, in the last few decades, Although Orelanna recognizes that these tragedies have hurt many people, she concludes that there's no point trying to imagine a world in which they didn't occur: there's no point trying to "fix destiny."

It's interesting that Orleanna thinks of her life as a manifestation of destiny: she thinks of her decision to marry Nathan and move to the Congo, for example, as fate, pure and simple. In other words, Orleanna has a hard time thinking of herself as a free agent: as she sees it, "her" decisions aren't really her own (the universe decides everything on her behalf). Orleanna is so used to being docile and submissive that she can't even conceive of a world in which she's free to do as she pleases: if she's not a prisoner to Nathan, then she's a prisoner to fate.

Book 4, Chapter 55 Quotes

❝ And so it came to pass that the normal, happy event of dividing food after a hunt became a war of insults and rage and starving bellies. There should have been more than enough for every family. But as we circled to receive our share of providence, the fat flanks of the magnificent beasts we'd stalked on the hill shrank to parched sinew, the gristle of drought-starved carcasses. Abundance disappeared before our eyes. Where there was plenty, we suddenly saw not enough. Even little children slapped their friends and stole caterpillars from each other's baskets. Sons shouted at their fathers. Women declared elections and voted against their husbands. The elderly men whose voices hardly rose above a whisper, because they were so used to being listened to, were silenced completely in the ruckus. Tata Kuvudundu looked bedraggled and angry. His white robe was utterly blackened with ash. He raised his hands and once again swore his prophecy that the animals and all of nature were rising up against us.

Related Characters: Leah Price (speaker), Tata Kuvudundu

Related Themes:

Page Number: 354

Explanation and Analysis

In this long scene, Kingsolver offers us an allegory of capitalism. The Congolese village has successfully completed a huge hunt: the hunters have killed a large number of wild animals, with the help of the children, the women, etc. In short, everybody has earned their equal share of the food. But instead of dividing the food equally, the villagers quibble over portion sizes. People greedily take too much, meaning that other people are given too little. Over time, a scarcity arises—somehow, there's not enough food to go around. Just like in a capitalist society (at least according to Kingsolver), the competition for *more* results in an overall deterioration of social relations: the villagers become each other's enemies.

It's important to note that the hunting scene arrives shortly before the assassination of Patrice Lumumba—the political tragedy that will usher in an era of rampant capitalism and foreign investment in the Congo. Kingsolver foreshadows the economic depression and social breakdown that Lumumba's death will ultimately cause.

Book 4, Chapter 60 Quotes

❝ Until that moment I'd always believed I could still go home and pretend the Congo never happened. The misery, the hunt, the ants, the embarrassments of all we saw and endured—those were just stories I would tell someday with a laugh and a toss of my hair, when Africa was faraway and make-believe like the people in history books. The tragedies that happened to Africans were not mine. We were different, not just because we were white and had our vaccinations, but because we were simply a much, much luckier kind of person. I would get back home to Bethlehem, Georgia, and be exactly the same Rachel as before.

Related Characters: Rachel Price (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 367

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Rachel reacts to the death of her little sister, Ruth May. Rachel has been living in a dream world up to this point: she's been living in the Congo, but she holds her community at a distance. In other words, Rachel thinks of her peers and neighbors as strangers—unlike her siblings, she makes absolutely no effort to get to know them (she's just counting the days until she's back in the U.S.A.) But Rachel can no longer pretend that her life in the Congo just a bad daydream: the Congo has killed her sister.

In this moment, Rachel's racism and self-absorption are made especially clear. She's always had an easy time distancing herself from her life in the Congo—not because she thinks the Congolese are necessarily inferior, but because she just assumes that they are "unlucky," and Africa could never become anything like America.

Book 5, Chapter 62 Quotes

❝ But his kind will always lose in the end. I know this, and now I know why. "Whether it's wife or nation they occupy, their mistake is the same: they stand still, and their stake moves underneath them. The Pharaoh died, says Exodus, and the children of Israel sighed by reason of their bondage. Chains rattle, rivers roll, animals startle and bolt, forests inspire and expand, babies stretch open-mouthed from the womb, new seedlings arch their necks and creep forward into the light. Even a language won't stand still. A territory is only possessed for a moment in time. They stake everything on that moment, posing for photographs while planting the flag, casting themselves in bronze. Washington crossing the Delaware. The capture of Okinawa. They're desperate to hang on.

Related Characters: Orleanna Price (speaker), Nathaniel Price

Related Themes:

Page Number: 384

Explanation and Analysis

In this prologue, Orleanna thinks about the way that history plays out over time. As she sees it, history always has a happy ending. Even if evil people (people who, more likely than not, are hypocritical, authoritative men) cause great misery, their reign will always come to an end. The Pharaoh of ancient Egypt may have hurt a lot of Jews (according to the Bible), but ultimately this injustice led the Jews to escape and find their "promised land." Similarly, oppressive patriarchs like Nathan cannot always maintain their control—those they persecute will eventually rise up against them.

Orleanna's philosophy of history is fascinating because it reminds us how uncomfortable she is with the concept of individual agency. Orleanna is so used to being submissive and docile that she has a hard time conceiving of a world in which individual people accomplish *anything* lasting. Instead, she thinks of the world in broad terms like "fate" and "destiny." Regardless of what individual people do, she believes, things will "work out" in the end. In all, Orleanna's worldview is a strange combination of passivity and optimism.

Book 5, Chapter 68 Quotes

❝ Neto is about Anatole's age, also educated by missionaries. He'd already gone abroad to study medicine and returned home to open a clinic, where his own people could get decent care, but it didn't work out. A gang of white policemen dragged him out of his clinic one day, beat him half to death, and carted him off to prison. The crowds that turned up to demand his release got cut down like trees by machine-gun fire. Not only that, but the Portuguese army went out burning villages to the ground, to put a damper on Neto's popularity. Yet, the minute he got out of prison, he started attracting droves of people to an opposition party in Angola.

Related Characters: Leah Price (speaker), Anatole Ngemba, Agostinho Neto

Related Themes:

Page Number: 431-432

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Leah describes the life she's made for herself after Ruth May's death (the event that broke up her family). Years have passed, and Leah is now married to Anatole Ngemba, the young man who tutored her when she first arrived in the Congo. Anatole has been in correspondence with Agostinho Neto, a young, ambitious political leader who sees himself as the successor to Patrice Lumumba. Like Lumumba, Neto is enormously popular with the people of the Congo (and Angola), though he alienates the government with his socialist views.

Leah's impressions of Neto suggest how political she's become since Ruth May's death. By marrying Anatole, Leah has committed to a lifetime of political engagement: support for Neto and other elected leaders, and general investment in the wellbeing of the Congo. Although Leah is clearly shocked by the way the government has treated Neto, she has a quiet optimism that Neto will succeed in his political goals—he has enough supporters to guarantee his success in the long run.

Book 5, Chapter 70 Quotes

❝ "He is the one wife belonging to many white men." Anatole explained it this way: Like a princess in a story, Congo was born too rich for her own good, and attracted attention far and "wide from men "who desire to rob her blind. The United States has now become the husband of Zaire's economy, and not a very nice one. Exploitive and condescending, in the name of steering her clear of the moral decline inevitable to her nature. "Oh, I understand that kind of marriage all right," I said. "I grew up witnessing one just like it."

Related Characters: Leah Price (speaker), Anatole Ngemba

Related Themes:

Page Number: 456

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Anatole (Leah's husband) gives Leah an analogy to explain the troubled history of the Congo. Anatole suggests that the Congo is like a beautiful but fragile woman, exploited by various powerful men (Belgium, Europe, the U.S.). Anatole implies that the Congo, while full of resources and strong, intelligent people, has never been allowed to grow to its full potential. Like a housewife forbidden from pursuing her own dreams, the Congo has been held in captivity, forced to work for others.

It's important to note Leah's reaction to Anatole's

story—she immediately sees an analogy between the Congo and Orleanna's marriage to Nathan. At one point, Leah admired her father, but now she sees him for the hypocrite he is. Nathan has held Orleanna in "captivity" for years, ignoring her feelings and forcing her to serve him. Furthermore, Nathan has justified his behavior by accusing Orleanna of being weak and sinful--i.e., he's used Christian dogma to hold Orleanna accountable for her sinful femininity.

In short, the passage is something like a "thesis statement" for the novel itself. By studying the close, intimate relationship between Nathan and his wife and children, Kingsolver suggests, we can better understand the broad, historical relationship between the Congo and the international community.

Book 5, Chapter 71 Quotes

❝ What happened to us in the Congo was simply the bad luck of two opposite worlds crashing into each other, causing tragedy. After something like that, you can only go your own way according to what's in your heart. And in my family, all our hearts seem to have whole different things inside. I ask myself, did I have anything to do with it? The answer is no. I'd made my mind up all along just to rise above it all. Keep my hair presentable and pretend I was elsewhere. Heck, wasn't I the one hollering night and day that we were in danger?

Related Characters: Rachel Price (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 465

Explanation and Analysis

Rachel, now a grown woman living in South Africa, thinks back on everything that's happened to her family since moving to the Congo. Rachel has always held herself aloof from other people, even her sisters, and here she doesn't seem particularly upset by the fact that the family has essentially split up.

In other words, Rachel has always been selfish. She's so obsessed with her own beauty and wellbeing that she can barely force herself to care about her sisters or mother. Rachel isn't presented as an evil character, but rather one with a very "Darwinian" worldview—life is about looking out for one's self. Rachel acknowledges that she herself is fortunate enough to be white, pretty, wealthy, and American, but she doesn't feel that this means she "owes" anything to anyone else, or ought to help them.

Book 5, Chapter 73 Quotes

❝ "Oh, Rachel, Rachel," Leah said. "Let me give you a teeny little lesson in political science. Democracy and dictatorship are political systems; they have to do with who participates in the leadership. Socialism and capitalism are economic systems. It has to do with who owns the wealth of your nation, and who gets to eat. Can you grasp that?"

Related Characters: Rachel Price, Leah Price (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 478

Explanation and Analysis

Years after Ruth May's death, the remaining Price sisters reunite in Africa. During their trip across the continent, Rachel claims that the socialists of the Congo are immoral and un-American, and that Ronald Reagan is going to install democracy and freedom in the country. Leah, clearly impatient with her sister's small-mindedness, corrects her sarcastically, pointing out that socialism and democracy are unrelated concepts—one doesn't exclude the other.

Leah's exchange with her sister shows how ignorant Rachel is of the realities of global politics: Rachel is totally willing to believe that socialism is un-American, simply because Ronald Reagan says so. As teenagers, Leah and Rachel were equally ignorant of politics and economics, but now that they're adults, it's clear that they've grown apart, intellectually and emotionally.

Book 5, Chapter 74 Quotes

❝ Don't we have a cheerful, simple morality here in Western Civilization: expect perfection, and revile the missed mark! Adah the Poor Thing, hemiplegious egregious besiege us. Recently it has been decided, grudgingly, that dark skin or lameness may not be entirely one's fault, but one still ought to show the good manners to act ashamed. When Jesus cured those crippled beggars, didn't they always get up and dance off stage, jabbing their canes sideways and waggling their top hats? Hooray, all better now, hooray!

Related Characters: Adah Price (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 493

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Adah, now an adult (and a prominent

scientist), thinks about the shallowness of the Western world's notion of imperfection. In the West, Adah realizes, pain and disability are thought of as hideous diseases, to be transcended through religion or medical treatment. Disabled people are thought of as imperfect—they're pitied for their physical problems, and expected to act apologetic and grateful at all times. Adah, who was disabled for many years (she could barely walk), has a more complex and subtle relationship with her disability. She doesn't resent her "imperfect" body—on the contrary, she embraces it, even after she regains full motor control.

Adah goes further, seeing in the Western world's treatment of disabled people a more general problem. Westerners, she believes, think of "different" people either as monsters to be killed or invalids to be pitied—but never as human beings. In other words, the West's shallow treatment of disabled people reflects a more general bigotry—the same racism that led Belgium and later the U.S. to intervene militarily in the Congo. Adah embraces her body in all its perfections and imperfections, and by the same token, she embraces people of all races.

Book 6, Chapter 78 Quotes

❝ My work is to discover the life histories of viruses, and I seem to be very good at it. I don't think of the viruses as my work, actually. I think of them as my relations. I don't have cats or children, I have viruses. I visit them daily in their spacious glass dishes, and like any good mother I cajole, I celebrate when they reproduce, and I take special note when they behave oddly. I think about them when I am not with them. I have made important discoveries about the AIDS and Ebola viruses. As a consequence, I must sometimes appear at public functions where I am lauded as a savior of the public health. This startles me. I am nothing of the kind. Certainly I'm no mad exterminator bent on killing devil microbes; on the contrary, I admire them. That is the secret of my success.

Related Characters: Adah Price (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 530

Explanation and Analysis

As a grown woman, Adah has developed her own unique philosophy. Adah has become a medical researcher—her job is to study viruses, including Ebola and AIDS. While most of her colleagues think of these viruses as deadly enemies, to be wiped out Adah thinks of them as fascinating strangers--to be greeted, embraced, and understood.

In short, Adah's attitude toward AIDs and Ebola reflects the way she's learned to treat unfamiliar people, and also her rather detached way of viewing the world and morality itself. By the same token, her colleagues' attitude toward viruses reflects the Western world's narrow-minded way of understanding difference. Most people think of viruses as enemies to be eradicated; Adah, trained by her years in the Congo to understand strangers, opts for a more nuanced, accepting point of view. While it may seem unusual to treat a deadly disease as anything *other* than an enemy, Adah has had great success in curing sick patients because of her unique worldview.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 1

An unnamed narrator describes a vivid nature scene, with vines, ants, trees, and snakes. Four girls and a woman enter the scene. The mother exercises wordless control over the girls. She warns the reader to be careful—"you'll have to decide what sympathy they deserve."

Right off the bat, we're informed that this isn't going to be a straightforward tale of good and evil. Instead, it's a complex "jungle' of right and wrong—none of the characters is perfect, so we have to figure out for ourselves who to trust.

The woman in this scene is the mother of the four girls—she lives in constant fear that something horrible is going to happen to one of her offspring. The narrator explains that she is the mother in the scene—Orleanna Price. She is a Southern Baptist by marriage, and the "mother of children living and dead." In the scene, a beautiful animal, an okapi, comes to the forest, and Orleanna is the only one to see it. It's only years later that Orleanna learns the name of the creature she's seen—she has to look it up in the library.

Although the five Price women aren't the only people in the Price family, it's true that the novel is told from a feminine perspective: each chapter is narrated from the point of view of a different Price woman or girl. Orleanna's sighting of the okapi immediately opens the book with a sense of ambiguity. The okapi (a real mammal related to a giraffe) is a mysterious, semi-mythical creature whose symbolic meaning will be explored again (see Symbols).

The year of the scene is 1960: the Space Race is well under way, and there is military turmoil in the Congo. Orleanna was there in the Congo, due to her husband and her children. She admits that no one in her family really needed her much—her husband, a Baptist preacher, didn't love her, and her firstborn child ignored her from the beginning. And yet Orleanna insists that she has "a life of her own." She's seen unbelievable things in the Congo: beautiful birds, ants and flies, trees and fires.

Orleanna is probably the closest thing to an objective witness in the novel: we can't trust everything she says about her husband and children, but she's usually the character who gives us the important expository information. Here, for example, she sets the scene: we're at the height of the Cold War, and the U.S. is involved in a series of foreign policy decisions that have since been greatly criticized.

Orleanna is an old woman now, but she thinks back to 1960, when she experienced Africa in all its glory. She will speak of "the things we carried with us, and the things we took away."

The novel is structured as a memory. This suggests that something important—traumatic, even—happened in the Congo, which haunts Orleanna to this day.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 2

Leah Price describes how her family traveled from Bethlehem, Georgia all the way to the jungle. Her mother, Orleanna, insisted that they bring Betty Crocker cake mix with them, since there would be none in Africa. Leah's father, Nathan Price, believed that bringing Betty Crocker was a waste of time since cake was a symbol of materialism and greed. But Orleanna isn't deterred—she packs other goods, such as ham, a mirror, and Band-Aids. Orleanna also brings antibiotics, a frying pan, and yeast. Nathan criticizes these supplies, citing the Bible verse about the "lilies of the field." Rachel, one of Leah's sisters, mutters that the "lilies" don't need Nathan's Bible.

There's a very uneven power dynamic in the Price household. Leah is clearly an intelligent, quick-thinking young woman, but she's basically powerless. The only truly powerful figure in her family is Nathan, the male "head of the household." Nathan's emphasis on the semantics of the Bible seems misplaced here: right or wrong, Nathan is neglecting the concrete things *that his family will need to survive in a foreign country.*

On the flight to Africa, the Price family's baggage is exhausting to carry. Rachel complains about the hassle of having to carry so many bags, but she also smuggles some supplies of her own, including nail polish, which Leah considers "Rachel to a T." On the plane, Rachel jokes with Adah, her sister. When the family disembarks in Leopoldville, Leah's younger sister, Ruth May, faints. She revives very quickly, but the incident disturbs Orleanna.

Leah seems thoughtful and introspective, while Rachel is more superficial and self-absorbed (at least from Leah's perspective). There's also some foreshadowing going on here, as Ruth May doesn't take to the Congo from the very beginning, and Orleanna senses that something is wrong with her youngest child.

In Leopoldville, a family of missionaries, the Underdowns, debriefs the Price family on their "mission" in the Congo. Nathan Price has come to Africa to practice his religion in Kilanga. Kilanga used to be a thriving village, with good healthcare and a regular outpost of missionaries. Currently, though, Kilanga is "in a slump." Leah is intimidated by the prospects of Kilanga.

Nathan has a specific "mission," or at least he believes he does. He's been sent to provide the Congolese with Christian teachings, but from a more practical perspective it seems that they need healthcare, food, and clean water much more dearly.

As Nathan speaks with Mr. Underdown, Mrs. Underdown playfully makes fun of Leah and her siblings for their thick Southern accents. Leah feels sensitive and self-conscious about her foreignness in her new home. It occurs to her that she and her sisters have each brought "some extra responsibility" to the Congo with them. Nathan has only one responsibility—bringing the Word of God—and it weighs nothing.

The title of this section—"things we carried"—doesn't just refer to the literal items that the family carries to Africa, but also to the emotional baggage that they bring with them. Strangely, Nathan seems to be the only one without this emotional baggage, as he seems entirely oblivious to how negatively his decisions have affected the rest of his family.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 3

Ruth May Price begins by reciting something her father taught her: the Bible argues that the Africans are the children of Ham, the "worst of Noah's three children." Ruth May sometimes identifies with Ham, because they're both youngest siblings, and Ruth May, like Ham, is sometimes bad.

Ruth May is referring to an interpretation of the Bible that used to be quite common: the idea that black people are descended from Ham, Noah's youngest, "cursed" child. For centuries, the story of Ham was used as a justification for slavery, colonialism, and other racist atrocities.

Ruth May describes how black people back home in Georgia conduct themselves: they're forced to attend different schools, and never really associate with white people. Ruth May is afraid to go to Africa, because one of her classmates warned her that the Africans would boil her and eat her. She consoles herself by bringing comic books on the airplane: Cinderella, Donald Duck, etc.

Ruth May is brought up in the Jim Crow South, meaning that she's probably been exposed to many racist ideas (like the Ham thesis). But she's also young enough that she hasn't had much time to internalize these racist beliefs, and so she retains a kind of innocence the rest of the family can't access.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 4

When Rachel Price arrives in Kilanga, her first thought is that "we"—the Prices—are badly outnumbered: there's a huge crowd in the street. She feels a wave of sympathy when Ruth May, who's only five years old, faints. Rachel thinks to herself that Ruth May is surprisingly strong for a little girl. Orleanna grabs Rachel's hand—something Rachel always hated back in Georgia—and pulls her out of the chaotic crowd.

Rachel immediately sees the Congo as an "us-them" situation: whites versus blacks. She's the eldest Price child, and so has had more time to absorb the racist worldview of the Jim Crow South. At the same time, Rachel is sensitive to Ruth May, and seems to feel genuine love for her.

Out of the crowd, Rachel takes a good look at her siblings: the twins (Leah and Adah) and Ruth May. Adah is shorter than Leah because of her "handicap." Together, the Price children are feeling tired and dirty—but there's no time for that. Rachel is particularly mortified that her hair is tangled and her dress is dusty.

Rachel isn't cruel or oblivious to her siblings, but her first priority always seems to be her own appearance and well-being.

Nathan Price leads his family to his church. There, a group of locals—many of whom are completely naked—has prepared a feast: they cook animals in the fire, and roast vegetables in a pot. As the locals cook, they sing songs in a foreign language. Slowly, Rachel realizes that they're singing to the tune of Christian hymns like "Onward Christian Soldier."

The song the locals sing is evidence of the influence of Christian missionaries on the community. And yet this influence isn't really what the missionaries were aiming for. The Congolese haven't really become Christians at all; they've just adopted bits and pieces of Christian culture.

One of the locals welcomes Nathan to the village, and asks him to say a few words. Without hesitation, Nathan rises and greets the villagers. Rachel notes that Nathan always seems confident and energetic. Nathan quotes passages from the book of Genesis, and mentions the "sinners of Sodom." Rachel, who knows the passage Nathan is quoting, remembers how Lot offered his own children to appease the city of lustful sinners, and she feels a wave of pure disgust.

This novel is full of Biblical allusions—here, for example, Nathan is citing a Biblical verse in which the virtuous patriarch Lot sacrifices his children for (supposedly) the greater good of his community. This is a hint that Nathan is trying to be something like Lot—endangering his family because of his ideals and values.

Nathan cries out that he will cure the villagers of their "nakedness and darkness of the soul." The villagers have become very quiet—they seem dismayed. The people mutter, and a few women cover their naked breasts. Many of the villagers go home, even though the food isn't ready yet.

From the beginning, Nathan makes no attempts to befriend the Congolese—they're just ignorant children who need to be pulled into salvation. Nathan comes across as an especially boorish, uncurious man.

When the food is prepared, Rachel and her siblings eat—but they find it disgusting. Although they want to spit it out, Orleanna hisses that they must eat it, or she'll "thrash them to an inch of their lives." Rachel begins to cry "for the sins of all who had brought my family to this dread dark shore."

In contrast to Nathan, who holds himself at arm's length from his new community, Orleanna at least seems to be making an effort to adapt to the culture of the Congo. (This is a pretty funny scene, too, as everyone's gone through the agony of having to finish a disgusting food for the sake of politeness.)

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 5

Adah Price describes her first morning in the Congo, the day after she arrives in Africa. The sun rises very early, around 6 am, because the Congo is so close to the equator. There's a constant sense of a *process* going on: birds cooing, fires burning, etc.—but it all amounts to "ashes to ashes." Nathan's church is at one end of the village, while the Price house is at the other end. Most of the houses in the village are tiny, with a thin, thatched roof. Adah finds it impossible to take her eyes off the villagers.

It's an early sign of Adah's intelligence and scientific turn of mind that she sees life in the Congo as a collection of processes to be dissected and analyzed. Adah is the most thoughtful of the Price children, if not the friendliest. She's not going out making friends with the villagers, but she is studying them as valuable and interesting people, not as inferiors or "heathens."

The women of the village, Adah notes, wear skirts when they work in the field or run errands. Their skirts are long and beautiful, with bright colors. Adah notes that her siblings and parents all have their own opinions of the village, which they present verbally. Only Adah is silent—Adah keeps all her opinions to herself.

Adah is the most introspective and thoughtful member of the Price family. Because she's a little standoffish and lonely (partly because of her medical issues), she has a great deal of time to think about her community and her surroundings.

Adah thinks about "Our Father," Nathan. He has brought a hammer to the village, but this was a waste, since there are no nails in the community. He claims that there are huge swamps surrounding the village, but Adah isn't convinced by this observation. She thinks about the Kwilu River nearby—a strange word, for which there's "no rhyme."

Adah already hates her father the most of all the Prices—the rest of them still feel that they at least ought *to love and submit to him. The term "Our Father" is an ironic one here. In Christianity, it's used to refer to God, but Adah uses it to draw attention to her father's arrogance and self-satisfied attitude: as far as Nathan is concerned, he is "God" of his family.*

Adah considers her "condition," which has left her so different from Leah, despite the fact that they're technically identical twins. Adah imagines herself and Leah competing for oxygen and nutrition while they were in the womb. Leah won this competition, and Adah has had hemiplegia ever since. This condition leaves Adah with poor circulation and limited mobility—her arms and legs are weak. Adah can't speak well, so she almost never does. She imagines how Nathan reacted when she developed hemiplegia as a baby: he probably claimed that it was "God's will," and took Adah's silence as a sign that his other children were chattering too loudly.

This is an important section because it shows us the differences between Leah and Adah, who are supposedly identical in every way. Adah's blood condition has left her quieter and more introverted than her sister. It's interesting that external factors like a disease can end up having such an important effect on someone's personality. Adah's hemiplegia has also alienated her from Nathan: Nathan shows no sympathy for his daughter's condition, and because he trusts "God's will," doesn't seem to have any desire to help her.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 6

Leah watches as her sisters explore their new home. Ruth May is scared of the neighbors, claiming that they'll eat her alive. Rachel claims that she's sick, but eventually she, Ruth May, and Adah help with unpacking. They put up mosquito netting and take quinine pills to avoid malaria—the "number one enemy" in Africa.

Ruth May isn't the only one of the Prices to be "afraid" of the neighbors—the Prices are all feeling like outcasts in Kilanga. For the first time in their lives, they are the clear minority. The mention of malaria is also important because it foreshadows problems the Prices will deal with later on.

Nathan notices a big clump of grass growing in a garden outside the house. He rips up the grass without thinking, and Leah is disgusted. She notes that Nathan thinks of himself as "the captain of a sinking mess of female minds," and she senses that her father finds her boring. And yet Leah enjoys spending time with her father.

The more time we spend with Nathan, the less appealing he becomes. Here, for instance, Nathan seems like the very embodiment of the imperialist aggressor, literally destroying the land of the Congo. Nathan's insensitivity to the Congolese is paralleled with his insensitivity to women, even those in his own family.

Nathan asks Leah why God gives mankind seeds instead of providing him with his nourishment in an easier way. Privately, Leah jokes to herself that seeds are easier to smuggle aboard a plane than whole fruits and vegetables. She also considers the fact that she's 14 years old, and recently began menstruating. Nathan tells Leah the answer to his own question: "the Lord helps those that help themselves."

Leah is the only member of the family who really gets along well with Nathan. This mostly seems to be because Leah shares Nathan's faith more than the other Price women. Significantly, we're also told here that Leah just began menstruating, a symbol that she's becoming a woman—and for her, part of growing up will mean growing away from her father.

Nathan proceeds to spend the afternoon farming his small square of soil, and Leah feels inspired to work hard for God and for her father. But she considers the fact that there are flowers growing near the soil—flowers which no one seems to have planted. Leah decides that God planted these flowers "by himself." Leah remembers how Nathan and his family came to be called to the Congo. At first, the religious organizers in Africa turned down Nathan. Only later did they accept him, knowing that they would need someone with a big, reliable family.

Nathan seems to have used his family like a bargaining tool—a way to ensure that he'd be sent to the Congo. Although we as readers can recognize that Nathan isn't the most honest or reliable of people (he's dragged his family to the Congo without consulting them), Leah seems not to realize this about her father at all.

As she thinks about her father, Leah notices Mama Tataba, an elderly woman who's been sent to help the Prices with their cooking and cleaning. Leah and her sisters fear Mama Tataba because of her blind eye. Mama Tataba tells Nathan that he's farming the soil wrongly—he needs to make tiny hills of soil around each seed. Nathan insists that he's doing his job right—he's been farming since he was a child. This angers Mama Tataba, who insists that nothing will grow unless Nathan makes hills.

Mama Tataba's presence in the Price household is an inconvenience to Nathan, even though it should be a blessing for the family to have a native Congolese woman helping them out. Instead, Nathan resents the fact that a black woman is presenting herself as an authority in his family—he likes to be the "head of household."

In the following days, Nathan wakes up with a horrible rash. He wonders aloud to Orleanna why God is punishing him for farming the soil so carefully. Undeterred, he goes outside to continue farming. There, he's surprised to find that Mama Tataba has been reshaping the entire plot of soil to make small hills. Nathan, annoyed, says that Mama Tataba is just trying to help, in her way, and then re-flattens the soil. Leah admires that her father is so forgiving of other people. Leah is also impressed with her father's diligence: he taught himself Hebrew as a child, taught his children French from an early age, and fought in World War II.

Although we recognize Nathan's actions as foolish, condescending, and arrogant (he doesn't want to admit that anyone else is right and he's wrong, or, more broadly, that Africans could have wisdom that Europeans/Americans lack), Leah finds them to be admirable: determined, tolerant, and forgiving. Even if we see through Nathan's attitude, we might also recognize that Nathan is a somewhat impressive figure to others: he's clearly a hard worker, and very disciplined.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 7

It is Easter Sunday, and Rachel is disappointed that there are no new clothes for her or her siblings. Rachel and the rest of the Prices head to the town church, and Rachel notices that her sisters don't seem to mind their dirty clothes. Rachel also notices the townspeople who are going to church, and criticizes their ugly dress sense—they pair bright colors together in a way that she finds garish.

Rachel's superficiality is almost comically exaggerated here—she's so ignorant that she judges the Congolese for wearing unusually colored clothes (even though they're probably judging her fashion choices, too).

Nathan has organized a Christian pageant, Rachel thinks, designed to attract as many visitors as possible. Recently, there have been few people in church on Sunday. Nathan comes up with the idea of a pageant, featuring the Christian resurrection story. The locals volunteer to dress up as Roman soldiers.

Nathan's ideas about converting the Congolese seem condescending from the start—one associates Christian pageants with elementary school Christmas plays—which is to say, with small children.

Rachel considers the locals who've dressed up for the day. She doesn't really care for the men in the pageant—she's not used to being around black people, since in America they mostly kept to their own part of town. The townspeople also eat funny meats like antelope, which Rachel has had to choke down many times since arriving in Africa.

Rachel mentions that the black men she's used to stay in "their part" of town—suggesting that she has no problem with the policies of segregation that characterized life in the South in the 1950s.

Nathan's first idea for the pageant, Rachel recalls, was that the children of the village would be baptized in the nearby river, the Kwilu. However, the locals vetoed this—they wanted to keep their children far away from the water for safety's sake. Nathan has planned a church supper in order to "lure" the townspeople closer to the river. The supper consists mostly of fish, which Rachel finds disgusting.

Nathan will spend most of the rest of the novel trying to compel the people of Kilanga to allow their children to be baptized. From the beginning, though, this mission seems futile: he has to resort to luring the Congolese to his church event because he has no other way of attracting their interest.

Locals show up for the supper, mostly women with their children. Rachel notices that the townspeople are wearing clothes, suggesting that word has spread that Nathan doesn't approve of nakedness. Everyone stares at Rachel, which Rachel is used to. She's blond, with beautiful blue eyes. Rachel thinks to herself that most of the Congolese people she's met seem not to have "much hair."

It's interesting that the Congolese make changes in their appearances to please Nathan, who's angrily condemned them for their nakedness. This suggests that the Congolese are actually being hospitable to their guests, the Prices: although Nathan doesn't appreciate this at all.

The Prices have prepared extra food for the supper: fried chicken. The chickens were a gift from Mama Tataba, who rounded them up and protected them from hungry villagers in the weeks leading up to the Prices' arrival. Rachel notices that Orleanna, who fixed the fried chicken, has truly "won the crowd." Nathan looks sad and lonely, however. He just stares out at the river, where no one is being baptized.

This is a slightly ambiguous passage, but it says a lot about the kind of man Nathan is. From Rachel's perspective, Nathan is sad because nobody is being baptized, but we can also sense that he's irritated that Orleanna has had more success with "recruiting" Congolese people than he has: he's so obsessed with being a "savior" that he can't enjoy his own wife's success.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 8

Ruth May notices the children in her new home. They have strange names and, in spite of their hunger, big bellies. One little girl stole one of Ruth May's toys. Ruth May isn't sure if the little girl should be considered a sinner, as Nathan says, or if she should be forgiven, as Orleanna thinks.

Ruth May is too young, innocent, and sheltered to understand the concept of malnourishment. One symptom of starvation is a swollen stomach.

Ruth May considers her other neighbors, like Mama Mwanza. Mama Mwanza's house burned down several years ago, scorching her legs, which later had to be amputated. Orleanna tells Ruth May that Mama Mwanza has a hard life now: she has to take care of her husband and her many children, even though she can't walk. She moves around on her hands, and carries her possessions on a basket on her head.

The notion that somebody could survive in a tiny village without use of one's legs is remarkable, but it suggests that the Congolese are mature and hardworking, in stark contrast to the way Nathan views them.

Ruth May reports that Rachel has become badly sunburned. Nathan thought that being in the Congo would be good for Rachel, because it would make her less vain and superficial. Orleanna complains that the villagers look upon the Prices as "freaks of nature." She also encourages her children not to point at the African villagers. Ruth May remembers something Nathan said: the Africans are "living in darkness." Orleanna disagreed with Nathan, saying that the Africans think of their bodies as objects to be exhausted and worn out over time. Nathan finds this idea disgusting.

Orleanna seems more in touch with her family's place in the community than Nathan does: she recognizes that although Rachel finds the Congolese ridiculous, the Congolese find the Price family even more *ridiculous. Nathan simply can't accept this way of looking at things: from his perspective, he's right and the Congolese are wrong. Orleanna's ideas about the human body—that it's not a sacred thing, but merely another object—are sophisticated, so naturally they displease Nathan.*

Ruth May remembers her father's rocking chair back in Georgia, a chair that only Nathan was allowed to sit in. Ruth May and Orleanna laugh about the chair, because someone else—probably the father of the family to whom the Prices rented their home—is sitting in the chair right now.

Ruth May doesn't fully understand this, but she's laughing at a challenge to Nathan's authority: someone back in Georgia is replacing Nathan by sitting in his chair. (Orleanna seems perfectly aware of this irony, even if her child isn't.)

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 9

Adah quizzes Leah in Bible verses. She gives Leah the verse, "Neither diabolical nor divine," but the question is a joke: the quote is actually from *The Strange Tale of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Adah is a voracious reader, though many of her favorite books Nathan doesn't approve of, like science fiction and fantasy stories. Orleanna was the one who first read to Leah and Adah. Orleanna was also the first person in the family to realize that Leah and Adah were highly intelligent.

As the book goes on, we see that Adah and Leah's intelligence vastly exceeds Nathan's. But because Nathan refuses to accept any challenge to his authority as the patriarch of the Price clan, Leah and Adah aren't really included in family decisions: they have to channel their intelligence into other avenues.

Adah thinks about the elementary school teacher who discovered that she was intelligent—Miss Leep. If it hadn't been for her, there's an excellent chance that she would have spent the rest of her adolescence in classes with mentally challenged children. By the time she was in the third grade, Adah was so good at math that she could sum up grocery bills in her head. She also enjoys constructing palindromes (words or phrases that are read the same way forwards and backwards) in her head. She's bothered that her name is spelled with an "h," meaning that it's not quite a palindrome.

Adah's frustration with her own name—it's almost a palindrome, but not quite—seems to suggest her frustration with her body: its natural beauty and perfection (demonstrated by her identical twin, Leah) has been corrupted by its own kind of "h"—hemiplegia.

Adah notices a parrot that flies around the house in the Congo. She's named the parrot Methuselah. Methuselah has learned one phrase from Nathan's predecessor in the Congo, Brother Fowles: "piss off." Adah thinks about this bird whenever her father orders her to copy Bible verses. Nathan loves to order his children to copy the Bible. While she's copying verses, Adah thinks about her new home, which is made of mud-walls and thatch. Still, it's larger than any other home in Kilanga.

In contrast to the intelligent, careful lessons that Orleanna gives her daughters, Nathan's lessons are mindless and useless: he thinks it's more important for his children to just copy Bible verses than to understand them. The presence of the parrot Methuselah in this scene has an obvious symbolic overtone: Nathan wants his children to "parrot" Scripture and Nathan's own ideas.

There are violent storms in Kilanga, and during the first storm, it rains all day. The rain subsides around sunset, and Orleanna leads her children out into the wilderness. There, they see tiny, drowned birds, which they find horrifying. They also notice that the plot of soil that Mama Tataba had advised Nathan to reshape into piles has been destroyed by the deluge: the seeds have been swept away as a result of Nathan's methods of farming. Afterwards, Nathan reshapes the garden into tiny mounds of earth to prevent future damage from flooding.

In the end, Mama Tataba is proven right, as might have been expected. Nathan's commitment to his own experiences and his own point of view has resulted in the garden patch being destroyed. It's satisfying to see Nathan go through the humiliation of reshaping the soil into mounds of earth—in the end, he has to listen and learn from the "unsaved," "inferior" Congolese after all.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 10

After the first rainstorm, Nathan's garden thrives, growing pumpkins and beans. Meanwhile, Rachel's 16th birthday arrives. Orleanna tries and fails to bake Rachel a cake—the oven in the house isn't good for baking. Also, the humidity of the climate makes the Betty Crocker cake mix crumbly and foul-smelling.

The family's experiences in Africa have challenged their assumptions about culture and community: the atmosphere of the Congo has destroyed the Betty Crocker cake mix (a symbol of traditional, all-American life).

Methuselah learns a new word, "Damn." Nathan finds this infuriating, and he demands to know who taught the bird that word. Leah feels extremely guilty, especially after her father reminds her that the parrot will never be able to beg for forgiveness from God; i.e., it's condemned to blaspheme God forever. Rachel blurts out, "We're sorry." Angry, Nathan tells the children to proceed with copying Bible verses.

Nathan's anger with the children seems hilariously petty. There's nothing particularly "evil" about a parrot saying a dirty word, but for Nathan, it's the worst thing imaginable.

As Leah copies verses, she hopes that Nathan took Rachel's comment as a confession. Secretly, though, Leah knows that it was Orleanna who accidentally shouted "Damn" about the Betty Crocker cake mix. The children have kept their mother's secret. Leah is used to protecting her mother from Nathan's verbal abuse, "and worse."

This is an important turning point in the novel: it's the first time we've been made aware of the fact that Nathan hits his children and his wife. It also points to a growing divide between Leah and her father: as Leah becomes more aware of herself and the outside world, her idealized view of her father and his faith crumbles.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 11

Adah describes how Nathan throws around the word "amen," and she refers to this process as the "amen enema" (a palindrome). In church, Adah sits next to Mama Tataba while Nathan preaches about how the Lord will deliver a great "bounty" of fish to the village. Adah recalls that Nathan has been trying to attract a congregation by promising food and nourishment. He's offered a feast of fish to the villagers, sure that he'll be able to convince them of God's teachings afterwards. As Nathan preaches about Daniel and Susanna, his translator, Tata Anatole, translates for the African congregation.

Nathan's sermon is a good example of how misplaced his delusions of control and power really are. He's gotten the idea of a feast from Orleanna (even if he would never admit it), and he's entirely dependent on Tata Anatole for communicating to the Congolese. Nathan likes to think of himself as being in control of his own actions, but we can see that this simply isn't true: without Orleanna and Anatole, he'd be lost.

Afterwards, Nathan eats supper with the rest of his family. Adah notes that Nathan rarely strikes his children at the dinner table. Instead, he asks them questions, designed to expose their stupidity and slow thinking. This time, Nathan talks about a group that drove to the village in a truck with a broken fan belt. The truck made it into town because boys made a fan belt out of elephant grass. Orleanna interrupts the story to ask a question, and Nathan snaps at her, implying—Adah thinks—that she's a foolish little girl.

This is another good example of Nathan's condescending manner. He treats his children as churchgoers, whom he must educate through parables and metaphorical stories (just like Jesus Christ teaching his followers). But when his family asks for clarification (or asks anything, really), Nathan gets annoyed, suggesting that he's more interested in hearing the sound of his own voice than he is in educating his daughters.

Dinner proceeds in silence. Orleanna cooks the meat, and this requires a lot of time, since it's sometimes full of parasites. Adah wonders about the creatures that God made: some of them are strange and even disgusting. And yet Adah finds herself respecting these creatures, even the parasites.

While Nathan spends his time "educating" his children's souls (i.e., lecturing them), Orleanna is the person who gets things done, and generally takes care of her family's material needs. Adah clearly takes a scientific view of the world, and is very curious about nature.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 12

Leah notices that Nathan prays and thinks alone in the garden. Later, he tells Leah about a Bible convention he attended in Georgia. Leah enjoys it when Nathan talks to her about such things. Nathan explains that the Bible convention attendees discussed the size of Heaven—its length, width, etc. Nathan remembers that the convention was unable to reach a conclusion, because the Bible measures the size of Heaven in various contradictory ways. Leah says that she hopes there's enough room for her. Nathan assures her that there will be.

While many Christians in America are trying to help the poor, fight racism, or wipe out disease, Nathan and his colleagues are using their faith and training to debate over the size of Heaven—a purely academic, pointless question with no possible answer to be found this side of the afterlife. Nathan's view of Christianity is very literal and narrow-minded, and Leah still follows her father's lead.

In August, Nathan preaches about baptism. Later in the day, Mama Tataba yells at Nathan, though Leah can't hear what they're arguing about. Later, Mama tells everyone that she can't stay any longer. With these words, she leaves the house. Leah goes to Nathan, wondering what could have happened. She's surprised to find Nathan studying a wasp he's caught—the wasp, Nathan explains, is a creature made by God for the purpose of pollinating African plants. Cautiously, Leah asks Nathan why Mama Tataba left. Nathan explains that Mama was arguing about a young girl who was killed by a crocodile last year. It's because of this girl that the people of the village don't want their children setting foot in the river for their baptisms. Nathan was furious that it took him 6 months to find out that this was the reason why nobody has been baptized yet. As Nathan explains this, Methuselah cries, "Piss off." Nathan angrily grabs Methuselah from his cage and throws him toward the trees. Methuselah opens his wings and flies away.

This long, humorous scene tells us a lot about the way the Congolese have been interacting with Nathan and the rest of the Price family so far. They've already decided how they're going to live their lives, and they don't really need any advice from Nathan. But because of politeness and respect, the Congolese have refrained from telling Nathan the plain truth: they're never going to endanger their children by allowing them to be sent to the river. Nathan has been so obsessed with the abstract, rules-based dimensions of religion that he's ignored the concrete, real-world facts: there are crocodiles in the river where he wants to "save" the children. It's an appropriate metaphor for the flaws in his religious values.

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 13

Orleanna still remembers the smell of Africa—a smell she finds almost impossible to bear. The smell reminds her of her mistakes as a mother: one of her daughters remains "buried" in Africa (we're not told which one). In Kilanga, she thinks, she could have been a better parent. She remembers a Sunday, when she was walking through the town with her daughters. At times like this, Orleanna thought of herself both as one of her own daughters and as Nathan's wife. "We're all women," she thinks. Orleanna still can't imagine how her daughters—now grown women—managed to grow up in such a sad family. She also notes that she misses coffee more than she misses Nathan. (We're not told what happened to Nathan.)

The suspense increases with this new information: we're told that one of Orleanna's daughters dies during her time in Africa. We're also told that Orleanna and Nathan have become separated sometime between 1960 and the present day. Orleanna's comment further cements the closeness between herself and her daughters—she is the older, protective mother, but they all face the same treatment from Nathan, the patriarch.

Whenever Orleanna sees an orange or a packet of detergent now, she remembers a man named Eeben Axelroot. Axelroot was a "hanger on" in the Congo: he knew how to get things, most of them from the local Mission League. Even the simplest things Orleanna was forced to buy from Axelroot, often for absurdly high prices.

Eeben Axelroot's presence in the novel is important because it brings an international, sociopolitical dimension to the story. From the start, it's made clear that his only rule is to make money.

Over time, Orleanna learned about life in the Congo. Most of the Africans in the community survived on a thick paste called fufu, made from a tuber growing in the ground. Fufu isn't very nutritious, and it even contains trace amounts of cyanide—and yet it's the only reliable food that the Congolese have. Orleanna also considers Mama Tataba. She was driven off, she thinks, by Nathan's "frightful confidence."

Orleanna is making a genuine effort to understand the people of the Congo—partly out of respect, and partly because she knows that this is the only way her family is going to survive in Kilanga for the next however many years.

Orleanna thinks about Africa and the Congo's place in the world. John F. Kennedy claimed that American leadership in the Congo was poor and callous, and Eleanor Roosevelt called for American intervention to "bring Africa into the 20th century." Orleanna concludes, "It was beyond me to weigh such matters." Orleanna had no time to consider the Congo's place in the world—she was too busy trying to contend with her husband. She realizes now that when she was in Africa, her children seemed not to love her half the time—probably because they, too, were so frightened and intimidated by Nathan. Orleanna remembers that Nathan used to play football in high school. Perhaps this gave him his competitive, single-minded character.

This is a complicated section, alternating between observations about international politics and the Price family. Orleanna recognizes that there have been some Americans who had a sincere desire to help the starving, dying people of the Third World. And yet these legitimate missions to improve quality of life may have become corrupted into a struggle for power during the Cold War. Orleanna seems to see a parallel between Eleanor Roosevelt's compassion and Orleanna's own relationship with her children: she has a sense that her love for her children has been corrupted by Nathan's influence.

Orleanna continues to think about Nathan. As time went on in Africa, Nathan's Christian mission became increasingly difficult to achieve. The leader of the village, Tata Ndu, publicly denounced Nathan for "feeding children to the crocodiles." Nathan was forced to apologize to Ndu, something that he was extremely reluctant to do. Even after his apology, Ndu refused to give Nathan his "blessing." This meant that Nathan was becoming an outcast in the village, with few people continuing to come to his sermons. In private, Nathan tore out his hair. He neglected his children and ignored their development.

Nathan's commitment to baptizing the children of the Congo is taking over his life: he ignores his family, neglects his wife, etc. This is tragic, not to mention ironic, since Nathan theoretically believes in the importance of love, family, and family values: his commitment to one aspect of Christian doctrine is causing him to sacrifice others.

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 14

During the first months in Africa, the Price family was forced to learn the names of all the plants and trees, Leah remembers. Leah was especially interested in learning the new words. The daughters learned from books left behind by Brother Fowles. They also became closer with their neighbors, such as Mama Mwanza. They also make friends with Tata Boanda, an old fisherman who is extremely thin. Leah knows that Boanda is a "sinner," because he has two wives, something Leah has always been told is a horrible sin. And yet Boanda's wives don't seem "fazed"—on the contrary, Leah thinks, they seem perfectly satisfied.

As Leah spends more time in the Congo, she sees that the people of Kilanga, in spite of the fact that they're not Christian, still seem happy, moral, and content. There's more than one code by which to live one's life, she realizes. This realization puts her at odds with Nathan, who of course believes that there's one and only one way to live life: according to a strict interpretation of the Bible.

Leah is now 15 years old, and continues to immerse herself in African life and culture. She's intimidated by the fact that young children speak the language better than she does. She also thinks that the villagers are interested in her family in the same way they'd be interested in a fire or a car crash.

Leah learns an important lesson here: the Congolese find her just as odd as she finds the Congolese. In this sense, Leah is very different from Rachel, who still thinks of herself as the "normal" one.

Orleanna insists that Adah and Leah continue with their schoolwork, even though there's no school for them to attend. Every morning, they study hard until lunch. Leah continues to envy the Congolese villagers for their knowledge of their own language. She also wishes she had friends to play with. Eventually, Ruth May finds other children to play with. Leah notes that Ruth May is amazingly strong-willed for a 5-year-old.

Adah and Leah concentrate on educating themselves, but they also recognize that education consists of more than copying Bible verses. Leah and Adah are genuinely interested in learning the Congolese language, and yet they're both reluctant to make friends with the villagers. Only Ruth May has the innocence to befriend Congolese children.

Leah is more interested in playing outside than her siblings. She wishes she could spend more time with Nathan, but instead, she goes hunting for Pygmies (small birds) and feeds Methuselah. She notices that most of the girls her age in the community already have children, and when Leah looks into their eyes, she sees deep maturity. The other girls call Leah "Beelezi"—Belgian. This makes Leah laugh.

Leah can see that the children of the Congo have experienced a great deal: they've seen tragedy and cruelty already, some of it doled out by the Belgians. It's telling that the children consider Leah a Belgian: they're so used to the Belgians' tyrannical regime that they conflate all white foreign visitors.

Leah describes the big outdoor markets in the village. There's a hairdresser named Mama Lo who spends most of her time there, selling palm oil and giving haircuts to little boys. Lo is highly industrious, perhaps because she doesn't have a husband. Leah also notices Eeben Axelroot, who lives in a shack far from the center of the village. Adah and Leah spy on Axelroot together, and they hear that he owns a radio.

One interesting character among the Congolese is Axelroot, who seems to belong neither to the Congo nor to Europe: he's isolated from the rest of his community, save for his radio.

One day, Leah returns from spying on Axelroot to find Ruth May playing "Mother May I?" (a children's game) with a group of young Congolese children. One of the boys playing the game is named Pascal, who's about 8 or 9. Pascal, Leah explains, is her first real friend in the Congo. Pascal tells Leah about the trees and plants in the area, including the poisonwood tree, which has smooth, shiny leaves. In return, Leah teaches Pascal some English words. Pascal seems more interested in Rachel's hair and Timex watch than in learning another language. But he's a warm friend to Leah, and gives her presents, such as sugarcane.

Pascal is an exceptionally generous person—it's as if he's too young to have acquired the selfishness and arrogance that we've seen in Rachel and Nathan. Here we're also introduced to the poisonwood tree, from which the novel takes its title.

It occurs to Leah that Pascal lives in another world from herself. He's never really had a childhood; in fact, he's been doing grown-up work for years now. Leah feels angry with Nathan for raising her as a "white preacher's child from Georgia." She's embarrassed for being so pampered and privileged.

This is an important turning point in Leah's life: it marks the first time when she feels truly embarrassed for being who she is; i.e., for being the white descendant of Europeans, as well as a "spoiled rich girl." Leah will continue to feel uneasy with her own identity throughout the novel.

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 15

Ruth May breaks her arm while spying on the "African Communist Boy Scouts." To begin her story, Ruth May explains that she was climbing up in a tree when she noticed a group of young men dressed in uniforms. Ruth May climbs trees in the afternoon, since Orleanna encourages her to study in the morning (Nathan, by contrast, insists that women shouldn't go to college). On this particular day, Ruth May witnesses the young men marching by. Later, Nathan and Orleanna tell her that these men are the "Jeune Mou-Pro," and warn her to avoid them. (Ruth May thinks that Orleanna is saying "Jim Crow.")

Here we're reminded that Nathan hates the notion of women educating themselves, but also that Orleanna's loyalty to her children is so great that she's defying her husband's orders. Jeune Mou-Pro was a real-life Congolese Communist group that lobbied for political autonomy from the European and American powers during the early 60s. "Jim Crow" is just the opposite of what the Jeune Mou-Pro represents: instead of accepting their status as second-class citizens on the international stage, the Congolese Communists are fighting for their freedom and equality.

Ruth May slips and falls out of the tree after the Jeune Mou-Pro march by. She's able to run back to her home, her arm in great pain. Orleanna discovers that Ruth May has broken her arm. She is angry with Ruth May, but she's afraid that if Nathan finds out that Ruth May was climbing trees he'll whip Ruth May. Eeben Axelroot is around the area, and he comes to the house to treat the broken arm. He provides a sling and other treatments for the injury. Axelroot insists that Ruth May needs to be taken to a doctor—but this will require her flying out of the town.

It's telling that even with Ruth May in great pain, Orleanna is afraid to tell Nathan what happened—clearly, she knows that Nathan will hurt his family if he finds out. It's a little too convenient that Axelroot is in the area immediately after a meeting of the Jeune Mou-Pro: it's suggested that he's been spying on them, the same as Ruth May herself.

Nathan flies with Ruth May to the nearest reliable doctor, as Axelroot flies them out of the town in a plane he owns. The doctor asks Nathan about the Jeune Mou-Pro, and seems surprised that they've come to Kilanga already. The doctor also seems to take issue with Nathan's being a missionary—he suggests that it's a bad way to "deliver the social services." Nathan is furious. He claims that he's bringing salvation to the Congolese, and the doctor yells back that Nathan is delusional. He says that nothing has changed in the Congo: first the Belgians enslaved the Congolese, and now the Americans have condemned them to survive on slave wages. Nathan claims that the Belgians and Americans brought civilization to the Congo, like roads. The doctor points out that the only roads the Belgians ever built were for transporting diamonds and rubber out of the country. He also mentions a young leader named Patrice Lumumba—the "new soul of Africa." This man, the doctor claims, has a bigger following than Jesus. Lumumba has been sent to jail for his political views, but will be released shortly.

This is a key scene because it provides a snapshot of what the educated population in the Congo (i.e., a doctor) thought of the Congolese liberation movement. While some, like Nathan, believe that the European and American intervention in the Congo has been useful for the country, the doctor in this scene can see that European intervention hasn't made the country a better place at all: it's mostly just deprived the Congo of its natural resources. (The Belgians established factories and mines in the Congo, beginning in the late 19th century, that were internationally condemned for their systematic brutality and cruelty to the Congolese people, who were often forced to work as slaves.) This is also the first we hear of Patrice Lumumba—he already appears as a symbol of Congolese independence from Europe.

Back in Kilanga, Ruth May nurses her injured arm. She notices that the Belgian Army shares territory with the "Jimmy Crow" boys. Some of the young boys in the community shout the name "Patrice Lumumba!" Ruth May tells Leah that Lumumba represents the new soul of Africa.

After decades of European tyranny, the Congolese want to be in control of their own society, and in this respect Patrice Lumumba represents hope.

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 16

Rachel is thrilled that the Prices are hosting "company" for dinner. Anatole, their guest, is a 24-year-old schoolteacher, though Rachel isn't interested in him, both because of his skin color and his facial scars. Nevertheless, Rachel is excited about spending some time with Anatole because she's so "unaccustomed to the male species" nowadays. She's also a little intrigued by Anatole's appearance—he's African, but his eyes seem vaguely Asian.

While her siblings educate themselves in Congolese culture and overcome their aversion to meeting Congolese people, Rachel continues to cling to a more racist, narrow-minded worldview.

Anatole is an impressive young man, who teaches at the local school, which he also runs himself. Six days a week, he teaches young children about the French and English language. Congolese children don't go to school past the age of 12 or so, and girls don't go to school at all. Anatole's parents, Rachel learns, are gone—his mother was sent to work in the Belgian mines. At dinner, Anatole tells Rachel that a quarter of the diamonds on the planet come from the Congo. This makes Rachel think of Marilyn Monroe singing "Diamonds are a girl's best friend."

Anatole is clearly an educated man: he's had plenty of unforgettable life experiences (including losing his mother to European tyranny) yet also has a dispassionate, scientific perspective on European imperialism. Rachel's reaction to Anatole's information—to compare this tragic fact with a Marilyn Monroe song—is a good example of her foolishness and superficiality.

Anatole uses the dinner to tell Nathan that Tata Ndu is angry with the "moral decline" of the village—a decline he attributes to Nathan's Christian sermons. Nathan is offended by this, and he insists that Christianity purifies the Africans, rather than corrupting them. Nathan says that he'll pray for Anatole, something that Anatole finds unnecessary, since Anatole has been a loyal ally to Nathan from the beginning, translating his sermons every Sunday. Nathan boasts that he's not afraid of any man in Kilanga, since the Lord has made him strong.

Anatole's point in this section is partly that Nathan doesn't know whom to trust: if Nathan were a wiser man, he would recognize that Anatole is a reliable ally to him. Instead, Nathan treats all Congolese people as equally unreliable and untrustworthy. Nathan thinks in rigidly dogmatic terms, so from his perspective, all the Congolese are the same: they're all unbaptized.

Anatole goes on to describe the other religions that the Kilanga villagers are attracted to. There's a man named Tata Kuvudundu—someone whom Orleanna had dismissed as the town drunk—whom the villagers actually regard as a preacher and a priest, and a loyal adviser to Tata Ndu. Tata Kuvudundu is perceived as magical, in part because he has six toes on his left foot. Nathan yells that this man is a "witch doctor." Orleanna takes this as her cue to get up and tell her daughters to help her in the kitchen, leaving Nathan and Anatole alone.

The Congolese practice other religions, which have a lot more credibility in the village than Christianity does. Naturally, Nathan doesn't like the notion that Anatole is comparing Christianity to a "pagan" form of mysticism. From a Congolese perspective, though, Christianity is just another form of worship—not an overarching truth that sweeps all others away.

From the kitchen, Rachel hears Anatole tell Nathan that Nathan shouldn't think of Tata Kuvudundu as his competition. Instead of responding to this, Nathan tells Anatole that he should leave at once. Anatole does so. Orleanna walks back into the room. Nathan angrily grabs a plate out of her hand and smashes it on the ground. Rachel recognizes that this was Orleanna's favorite plate, one that she'd brought all the way to the Congo from Georgia. Nathan then claims that Orleanna was getting too attached to the plate, and being too vain and superficial. He suggests that Orleanna was using her favorite plate in order to impress Anatole, the "young negro." Quietly, Orleanna admits that she was wrong to be so fond of the plate.

Although Kingsolver never once writes a scene in which Nathan actually hits his family members, we get a sense for the violence that is always lingering under the surface of the family dynamic. We also see some of Nathan's weaknesses and insecurities here: he seems to resent that Orleanna is beautiful. Tragically, Orleanna doesn't stand up for herself, even though it's clear that her husband is being ludicrous. She's so frightened of Nathan that she stays silent.

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 17

Adah explains that she's recently been declared dead—Tata Ndu declared it, assuming she'd been eaten by lions. Adah explains how this all came to happen.

Adah's chapters begin always on a bizarre, humorous note. Her isolation from the rest of the community gives her a detached, ironic perspective: in short, she jokes about the things everyone else is too afraid of to joke about.

One afternoon, Leah and Adah go to gather water. This is tough for Adah, since she only has one good hand. During strenuous physical activity like this, Adah likes to think of palindromes, since it distracts her from her pain. This particular afternoon, she and Leah walk through the forest, noticing tiny elephants, Pygmies, and other exotic animals. She also notices other things, like young men practicing military drills. One of these men, Adah realizes, is Anatole. Anatole is reading aloud a letter about the Belgians' decision to offer the Congo its independence. As Anatole reads the letter, his friends laugh sarcastically.

Although Leah and Adah are twins, Leah doesn't seem very attentive to Adah's physical disabilities: she isn't helping her sister or giving her any encouragement (whether because she's oblivious or because Adah doesn't like it, we can't be sure). It also seems that Anatole is meeting the Jeune Mou-Pro again: it's here that we learn that the Congo is going to become an independent country very soon.

Adah makes it back to the house, with Leah walking far ahead of her, bearing the buckets of water. When Adah returns to the house, she lies in a hammock and relaxes. As she lies there, Tata Ndu arrives and demands to speak to Nathan right away. He tells Nathan that Adah has been eaten by a lion. Ndu says that when he was walking by just now, he noticed the tracks of a lion, approaching the footsteps of a girl who walks with a limp. This, Ndu concluded, means that a lion ate Adah. Furthermore, Ndu claims that this is proof from the gods that they don't want Nathan's Christian teachings anywhere in Africa. Adah is fascinated with this exchange, and remains in the hammock, silent. She notices her mother's face in pure grief. Nathan, on the other hand, orders everyone to pray to the Lord.

This is at once a funny and a deadly serious scene. It's pretty horrific that Nathan's first reaction, after learning that his daughter is dead, is to argue with Tata Ndu about the future of Christianity in the village: he's so fixated on his Christian mission that he's restrained all feelings of affection for his child. It's also amusing that Adah allows this scene to persist for a few minutes before announcing that she's still alive—one gets the sense that she's interested in gauging her own significance to the community of Kilanga, like a scientist measuring a variable for an experiment.

Eventually, Adah gets up and shuffles over to Nathan and Ndu. Ndu is highly embarrassed, and leaves at once.

The scene ends as it inevitably has to. But Adah has finally seen what her father really thinks of her, and how important the struggle for religious supremacy in Kilanga has become.

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 18

After Anatole's dinner with the Prices, he sends a young boy named Lekuyu to the Prices' house. Anatole leaves a note explaining that the boy, a great student, should be given meals, be allowed to sleep in the chicken house, and be referred to as Nelson. The Prices agree to take in Nelson. Inside the house, Nelson is struck by the mirror on the wall—apparently the only mirror in all of Kilanga.

The fact that Anatole sends a boy to stay with the Prices is a sign that the Prices are beginning to fit in with the rest of their community. It's also interesting that Nelson has never seen a mirror before: the mirror is a traditional symbol of vanity and self-absorption, so it seems darkly ironic that the supposedly civilizing forces of America and Christianity have brought these vices to Kilanga.

Nelson quickly begins working hard for the Prices. He brings water and boils it so that Orleanna doesn't have to. Leah assumes that Anatole sent Nelson to the Prices because they own so many books, and because Nelson is 12 (meaning that his traditional Kilanga education is over).

The Prices certainly aren't great examples of a family that emphasizes education (because of Nathan's rules), but they are the wealthiest people in Kilanga, and have the most books, so Nelson has his best chance of a continuing education with them.

In a house down the street, someone dies suddenly, and Orleanna becomes paranoid that a disease is spreading through the village. She tries to convince her daughters to stay indoors at all times. At this time of year it also rains heavily, meaning that diseases spread more easily. As a result, the children stay indoors. Leah develops a fever—she's caught malaria, and spends the next few weeks confined to her bed.

Orleanna's concern for her family is enormous—she can't stand the idea of one of her daughters falling ill. This sudden outbreak should also remind us of the earlier revelation that one of the daughters is going to die before the novel is over.

At the end of the year, for Christmas, Orleanna gives her children needlework equipment. Leah begins to think about the possibility of getting married someday. She complains that she's flat-chested and skinny, and adds that she doesn't have much interest in marrying a man. Nathan insists that a woman who doesn't get married is ignoring God's plan. Rachel, unlike Leah, insists that she'll be getting married soon enough—she's always tried to look beautiful. Rachel is much better at sewing than Leah. Sometimes, Leah prays to God to make her a better wife.

Leah's considerations of marriage symbolize her growing maturity. This also shows that Leah is beginning to doubt her father's authority: she's questioning Nathan's misogynistic view of the world. Leah is maturing quickly, but she's still trapped in the paradigms her father has offered her: i.e., she believes that her goal in life is to be an excellent wife.

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 19

Ruth May reports that she tried to see Nelson naked. When Nelson gets up in the morning he's naked, and he puts on his clothes in the chicken house. One morning, Ruth May sneaks outside and peers into the chicken house. There, she meets Nelson, already dressed. He shows her the chickens in the chicken house, and takes in some eggs for Orleanna.

Ruth May is maturing, along with her other sisters. She's entering the age when she's conscious of sexual attraction to (or at least curiosity about) other people.

Nelson tells Ruth May that the people of the village have "one foot in the church and one foot out." Ruth May isn't sure what this means. Ruth May also notices that Leah has taken an owl for a pet, something that annoys both Nelson and Pascal—they claim that owls "eat souls." This reminds Ruth May that the people of Kilanga don't really trust the Prices, and some of them are even scared of Jesus. Most people in the village worship other gods. Ruth May admits that she's scared of Jesus, too.

The Congolese aren't wholly committed to Christianity, or to any religion, in the sense that Nathan wants them to be. Ruth May's own fear of Jesus also shows just how unsuccessful Nathan has been in his attempts to convert people. If Nathan presents himself as a representative of Jesus and Christianity, then of course the religion won't seem very appealing at all.

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 20

It's January, and the Underdown family shows up from Leopoldville, riding in Axelroot's plane. Orleanna is upset that the Underdowns see her doing housework in her worn clothing, as she's embarrassed to be caught in such a position. Mrs. Underdown greets Orleanna and then teases her about her accent, something that always bothers Rachel. The Underdowns tell Orleanna that the Congo will have democratic elections this year, leading up to their declaration of independence in June. Nathan points out that Belgium won't accept the terms of the election. Rachel is annoyed that Nathan always acts like he can predict the future. She also notices Leah, standing very close to Nathan. Rachel remembers that Nathan beat Leah for trying to keep an owl as a pet—ever since, Leah has been trying to win Nathan back.

The Underdowns' behavior around Rachel reminds us that the Prices are outsiders, even among other white people in the Congo (let alone in Kilanga). The Underdowns offer important information about the Congo's upcoming independence, and Nathan shows his true colors, acting as if the Belgians have some right to continue controlling their colonial territory. Rachel, for all her faults, is in some ways more insightful than Leah: Leah is still trapped in the delusion that she should be trying to please her father, even though Rachel can see very clearly that this is a fool's errand.

The Underdowns continue talking about the upcoming election. They explain that Belgium has agreed to accept the terms of the election. Frank Underdown says that both the Russians and the Americans have a stake in the Congo's future. As a result, it's like that they've pressured Belgium into accepting the election results; furthermore, it's likely that Lumumba will be elected in a landslide.

Patrice Lumumba was a real-life political leader in the Congo, who campaigned on the platform of Congolese independence from European influence of any kind. Underdown is realistic about Lumumba's popularity, even though Nathan refuses to accept the obvious truth.

Frank Underdown reminds Nathan that he wasn't really supposed to come to the Congo at all, as the Mission League thought that the country would be too unstable for missionary work. Also, it never offered the Prices the usual language training. Underdown claims that the Mission League's monthly stipend—the income that allows the Prices to continue living in the Congo—is an act of charity, nothing more. Orleanna yells at Underdown for insulting her family, and Nathan reprimands her, as if he's punishing a dog that's peed on the carpet.

Nathan comes across as particularly childish and weak in this section—he acts as if he's above Orleanna, when in fact Orleanna is doing a better job of defending the family from Underdown's criticism than Nathan ever could. He is powerless in his position in the world at large, so he clings to and abuses his power within his own home.

Frank Underdown tries to restore calm, and he tells Orleanna and Nathan that he doesn't know how much longer the Prices should be staying in Kilanga, due to the independence movement. Orleanna tells Frank that he should have expected "trouble," what with the way the Belgians rule the Congo: just last month, a local woman told Orleanna about a man in the mines whose hand was cut off as a punishment. Frank says that Belgium has always controlled the Congo with a "strong, tight hand," so when the hand lets go, there won't be any kind of transition period.

Orleanna's attention to the actual people of Kilanga has made an obvious impression on her; because she's talked she other neighbors, she can't believe the naïve myths of benevolent colonialism that Nathan subscribes to.

Frank proceeds to tell the Prices about what will happen in June: Belgium will pull out of the country, leaving the Congolese to rule themselves. Orleanna finds this terrifying. The Congolese are uneducated and unorganized, in large part because of the Belgians' cruelty over the decades. Frank doesn't have a response to this. Nathan claims that the Congolese wouldn't even know if there *were* an election—they're too isolated and ignorant of their country. Nathan concludes, "in God's benevolent service we will stay."

Once again, Orleanna is more insightful and intelligent about the future of the Congo than Nathan is: she recognizes that the Belgians' refusal to allow a Congolese elite has jeopardized the country's chances for success following the Belgians' departure. (In real life, the Belgians forbid the Congolese from attending Western schools or attaining advanced degrees of any kind.)

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 21

Adah thinks of one of her favorite poets, William Carlos Williams. She likes this name, and finds it interesting that he managed to be both a poet and a doctor. Adah explains that there's a constant "wave" of dead children in the village—Pascal's brother died just the other day. Nathan seems not to care about the dying children; he's more concerned with the children's souls.

Adah's interest in Williams is intriguing, and surely connected to the symmetrical nature of his name and his work. Adah views the events of the village—even the every tragic ones—dispassionately. Her medical condition has made her seemingly immune to sentimentality of any kind.

The thunderstorms have subsided in Kilanga, meaning that fewer children are dying of disease. Meanwhile, Axelroot travels widely to sell supplies and technology. Adah becomes more conscious of the way her community is seen in other parts of the world. Based on the conversation with the Underdowns, she thinks that the Americans and Russians see the Congo as a "place for cannibals." Adah admits that they might have a point—after all, Nathan did offer children to the crocodiles.

Adah can see that Axelroot is in touch with American and European allies. This suggests that the Congo is still very much under the influence of "colonial powers." Adah also ironically points out that the kind of "savagery" the Western world assumes exists in Africa actually comes just as often from its "white saviors" like Nathan.

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 22

Rachel describes how Nathan flies to Stanleyville with Eeben Axelroot to pick up more quinine pills (necessary for treating diseases like malaria). Rachel, unlike Ruth May, is careful to always take her pills—she's too vain to risk catching a disease.

It's not clear what's going to happen after the Congo gains independence from Belgium—will Axelroot still be around to take care of Nathan, or will the Prices have to find other ways of getting supplies?

Rachel notes that Nathan is angry with the Underdown family. They send him supplies every month, but they also send him a letter ordering him to prepare to leave the Congo on June 28. Nathan tells Orleanna that he refuses to leave. Orleanna insists that Nathan is endangering his children's lives, but Nathan ignores her.

In a way, Nathan isn't saying anything that he hasn't already implied. Nathan was always more interested in spreading Christian doctrine than in keeping his children safe—if this weren't the case, he would never have moved to the Congo in the first place.

The election has just occurred, and Patrice Lumumba has been elected the new Prime Minister of the Republic of the Congo. Orleanna asks Nathan if Lumumba is a Communist, and Nathan answers that he's not sure. Rachel imagines Lumumba leading the new parliament, which consists entirely of people like Tata Ndu. Rachel is so sick of the Congo that she can't wait to leave.

Rachel's impressions of the Congo's future are actually pretty insightful (definitely more so than Nathan's). She realizes that Lumumba's new regime must be built upon the current one: he'll have to rely on traditional structures of power, like tribal chiefs.

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 23

Ruth May reports that Nathan and Leah flew away "on the plane." This isn't Axelroot's plane, but a special charter plane, one sent by the Underdowns to transport the Prices out of the Congo. Nathan leaves in the airplane with Leah, claiming that they'll be back soon. (We're not told where they're going.) Meanwhile, Orleanna sits in bed all day, too sick to get up. Rachel tries to take care of Orleanna, but to no avail. It's very quiet in the house.

As this part of the novel progresses, we see the Prices in airplanes more and more often, reflecting the rapidly changing circumstances of the country. It's poignant to see Rachel trying and failing to take care of her mother—Orleanna is a great provider, so when she's sick, her children aren't sure what to do.

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 24

Leah and Nathan have patched things up, Leah claims. They're going to Leopoldville together instead of flying out of the continent. There, they witness the independence ceremonies that will usher in new leadership in the Congo. Even the King of Belgium is in attendance here.

Leah believes that she's patched things up with her father, but by this point, it's pretty clear that Nathan simply doesn't feel much love for his daughters. This makes Leah's struggle to "earn" his love especially tragic.

Leah overhears people talking about King Leopold, the Belgian leader who made the Congo "what it is today." Afterwards, Leah and Nathan run into the Underdowns. Mrs. Underdown is shocked to see them—Nathan is supposed to be leaving for the U.S., not hanging around in the Congo. Privately, Mrs. Underdown tells Leah that Nathan must not be in his right mind. Meanwhile, Lumumba is inaugurated. He's a tall, thin man, with an intelligent face. It is June 30, 1960.

Although the Congo is about to attain its independence, there's still a huge amount of Belgian influence visible in the Congo: that's why there's still talk of King Leopold on inauguration day (King Leopold was the brutal Belgian monarch who was personally responsible for pushing for crueler, more barbaric conditions in the territory).

Lumumba delivers a speech. He claims that Belgium has given the Congo 80 years of pain and exploitation. As he speaks, Leah thinks about the splendors of Leopoldville, a large city with beautiful white buildings, and then she remembers the squalor of Kilanga. Lumumba's eyes seem to be on fire as he speaks, and when he falls silent, the crowd roars.

Leah begins to see Lumumba's point: the beauty of a city like Leopoldville was only possible because *of the poverty and decrepitude of villages like Kilanga: the Europeans deprived the Congolese of their own riches in order to build cities. As Walter Benjamin wrote, "There is no document of civilization that is not also a document of barbarism."*

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 25

It is June 13th, 1960—Independence Day for the Congo. On this same day, Adah follows a trail of feathers and realizes that Methuselah has been "freed" from his cage and eaten by some kind of predatory animal.

Methuselah's "liberation" from his cage has an obvious symbolic resonance: it suggests the Congo's struggle for freedom, and how liberation and tragedy are often closely linked.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 26

Orleanna begins by addressing a "little beast," speaking as the little beast's mother. Orleanna points out that there have always been fathers like Nathan, who think that daughters should work, bear children, and do nothing else. She hoped for a day when her daughters could walk away from their father's ideas.

As the novel goes on, we get more insight into Orleanna's mind. Orleanna doesn't want her children to grow up to be obedient wives—she wants to save them from the same fate she met herself. The nickname "little beast," as we'll learn, refers to Ruth May.

Orleanna thinks back to her "downfall." She had a happy childhood in Jackson, Mississippi, and survived the Great Depression in conditions similar to the ones she'd find in the Congo years later. Her father, Bud Wharton, was an eye doctor. When Orleanna was older, she became a "Free Will Baptist," something that irritated her father, who believed in the "religion" of his medical practice, and nothing else. Orleanna met Nathan at the age of 17, when he was handsome and charismatic. He was already very pious, and told Orleanna that he was going to "save" her. Nathan visited Orleanna all the time, while also working hard with his congregation. Marrying him felt like the natural next step.

At this late stage in her life, Orleanna can look back on her youth and understand the mistakes she made. It's because she feels the impact of these mistakes that she's always been so careful to encourage her daughters to be free and independent people. Essentially, Orleanna's great mistake was to believe that Nathan could save her—i.e., that he represented some kind of perfect solution to her problems.

Orleanna married Nathan in the late 1930s. After that, she was saddened when America declared war on Japan and Nathan shipped off to fight, despite the fact that (as a clergyman) he was technically exempt from duty. Nathan was only gone for three months. His company fought in the Pacific, and saw active combat late one night. Nathan was struck in the head by a shell fragment, and ended up suffering a concussion that sent him to the hospital. He credits God with saving his life. Orleanna claims that this was the last she knows of the man she married—a kind, funny, affectionate young man.

This is a surprisingly sympathetic account of Nathan's life: Orleanna accepts that Nathan has been made the man he is today by the tragedies of war, rather than some innate sense of meanness or boorishness. It's tragic and somewhat ironic that Nathan himself is a victim of America's military—as we'll see in the second half of this book, the American military will do great damage to the people of the Congo.

After Nathan left the hospital, he was sent to Bataan, where he and his peers were captured, marched through the jungle, and tortured and starved for months. At the last moment, MacArthur's troops freed Nathan from the Death March, saving his life. When Nathan returned, Orleanna could see right away that he'd become a different man.

The Bataan Death March is often remembered as one of the darkest chapters of World War II—a time when American soldiers were treated brutally by their Japanese captors. We can surmise that Nathan went through some sort of trauma, and probably has post-traumatic stress disorder.

Now back in the South, Orleanna compares her early days of marriage to Nathan (After he returned from Bataan) to being dominated by a "foreign power." She felt that she was married to an idea, a plan, rather than a person. Nathan had ambitions to preach God's plan for the rest of his life, and impress upon his own children the laws of Christianity. He interpreted Adah's medical problems as God's punishment—though for what, Orleanna was never sure.

This is one of the key passages in the book: the equation of Nathan's sexist, domineering patriarchy and aggressive foreign policy. This isn't always a perfect analogy, but the suggestion would seem to be that Orleanna, in being dominated for so long by an abusive husband, intuitively grasps some of what the people of the Congo are going through.

Nathan believed one thing: God rewards the righteous. Orleanna went through her marriage with a constant sense of being punished—for being beautiful; for being ogled by other men; for giving birth to a child with a serious medical problem; for being a bad wife. Orleanna tells her "little beast" that she's long since lost her wings, though she may have gotten them back. She concludes by comparing the Congo to a "bride" who's had her jewels taken from her by men who "promised the Kingdom."

Orleanna is made to feel that it's her *fault when men ogle her. It's heartbreaking to see Orleanna continuing to grapple with this psychological issues decades after she's left her husband behind. It's hard to shake certain habits of thought—Orleanna might consciously realize that she shouldn't be blaming herself for the tragedies in her life, but she also can't* prevent *herself from thinking in such terms.*

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 27

Leah and Nathan fly from Leopoldville to Kilanga. When they're back at home, Leah is very hungry, and begins thinking about how they're going to survive from now on. Because the Price family won't be receiving money from the Mission Foundation anymore, they'll have to find other sources of income. Furthermore, Nathan has had to bribe Axelroot to fly them back from Leopoldville, using the last of the family savings.

Nathan's stubbornness is now endangering his family's life in concrete ways. His drive to pass on his brand of Christianity to the people of the Congo is foolish, perhaps, but now that we know more about his backstory he becomes slightly more sympathetic (or at least tragic) of a character.

Leah notices that Rachel seems particularly pale. "Mvula"—the Congolese word for pale—has become Rachel's nickname in the community. Leah also notices Nelson, who seems sympathetic to Leah, as if he senses the hardship she and her family will be going through now that the Congo is independent. Nelson suggests that "someone" is testing the Price family, though Leah isn't sure what he means by this.

It's ironic that Leah gets more emotional support and encouragement from Nelson than from Nathan. It's also interesting that Nelson brings up the idea of being "tested," even if he doesn't do so in explicitly Christian terms. This points to the universality of certain religious ideas, like finding purpose in hardship.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 28

"Muntu," Adah thinks, is the Congolese word for man. She's interested to learn that it's also the word for corpse, baby, and God—the Congolese don't make the usual distinctions between the living and the dead. Nelson teaches Adah this and other words, including "mvula," the word to describe Rachel.

Adah finds that certain Congolese words have interesting double meanings that illuminate certain qualities of the things themselves (for instance, the equation of man, baby, and God seems relevant to Nathan, a babyish adult who thinks of himself as omnipotent).

Nelson asks Adah what happened to the Price family before Adah's birth—in other words, what tragedy were the Prices being punished for with Adah's medical condition. Adah is confused until she realizes that Nelson isn't talking about her blood disease, but the fact that she's a twin. She learns that often, infant twins are sent "to the forest" to die. Twins are seen as "too much" by the Congolese.

It's interesting that we're only now learning about this aspect of Kilanga's society—a practice that seems incredibly barbaric. Kingsolver doesn't want to excuse infanticide; rather, she's trying to convey the enormous differences between two cultures.

Adah learns other words, such as "batiza," or "baptism," the practice that Nathan has worked so hard to introduce to the Congo. Interestingly, "batiza" can also mean "to terrify" if pronounced in a slightly different way. Adah finds this amusingly appropriate.

Once again, the double-meanings of Congolese words can be used to study real problems. As the word "Batiza" suggests, Nathan's preaching is terrifying to the Congolese.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 29

Ruth May describes lying down with her mother and looking at the world sideways. As she lies down, she thinks about her secrets. Ruth May secretly wishes that Nathan would leave and never come back—but only Jesus knows about this. Ruth May has a dream in which she sees a huge tree, at the top of which sit the Tribes of Ham, the African peoples of the world. She also sees Orleanna, who is thinking about animals. Ruth May concludes, "sometimes when you wake up you can't tell if it was dreaming or real."

As Ruth May accepts that she's afraid of her father. Her dream is confusing in a couple different ways. Once again, Ruth May seems to identify with the "cursed" children of Ham. She's also interested in the idea of progress, symbolized by her climb to the top of the tree. It's as if Ruth May's innocence gives her access to a kind of mystical, spiritual truth (as we'll see in the novel's Epilogue).

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 30

The Congolese independence movement has cut off the Prices' stipend, leaving them wanting for food. At this time, Orleanna and Ruth May become sick and feverish. Nathan ignores them, however. He just continues with his preaching, leaving Adah, Rachel, and Leah to take care of his wife and daughter.

Adah just confirms what we've already seen from Nathan: he prioritizes preaching over taking care of his family. Now that we know more about Nathan's background, we can grasp where he gets this strict, militaristic sense of duty.

Rachel works with Adah and Leah to figure out how the family will survive from now on. They'll need to boil all their own water, take stock of their current food supply (not much—mostly dried fruits and canned sardines), and kill some chickens from the chicken house to make ends meet for now. The sisters debate whether or not they have enough chickens to keep Nelson around—at the moment, he works for them in exchange for a large supply of eggs. After some thought, they agree to keep him.

While there may be a practical downside to taking care of Nelson (one more mouth to feed), the Price women want to help another human being, especially a young boy they've grown close to. So even if the Price women are more practical than Nathan, they're still willing to sacrifice their own safety and nourishment for moral reasons.

Adah notices that Rachel is acting more adult than usual—volunteering to bake bread, for example. Rachel goes through phases in which she plays the part of the big sister, but these phases are always short-lived (Rachel is only 16 months older than Adah and Leah, anyway).

Adah finds that Rachel is just "playing" a leadership role. This parallels the way that various political groups were impersonating political authority with various degrees of success in the Congo at the time.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 31

After some three weeks, Leah manages to get Ruth May out of bed, in spite of her sickness. Leah reads books to Ruth May and tries to keep her entertained. Outside, they play around, and Leah notices Anatole strolling by. Anatole has come to give the Prices a pig in a sack—free food. Leah is delighted, and plans to make a big stew with the pig.

In spite of their tough situation, the Prices survive in the Congo thanks in large part to the generosity of their neighbors. This is inspiring in no small part because it shows that although the villagers distrust the Prices' religion, they consider it a duty to take care of their guests.

Leah continues talking to Anatole. They laugh and joke before Anatole tells Leah the other reason he's stopped by the house: he needs to talk to Nathan. Leah promises to tell Nathan the news, and Anatole explains that Moise Tshombe, the leader of the Lunda tribe, has declared his tribe's intentions to secede from the Congo. Leah is a little confused—she doesn't understand the relationship between the different regions of the country. Anatole tells Leah to look around: Kilanga never really belonged to Belgium in the first place.

In the immediate aftermath of Congolese independence, various groups are instigating miniature independence movements—understandably so, since the country's borders and entire idea of "the Congo" were an imperialist creation, lumping together distinct tribes under one name and one oppressive ruler. Lumumba's task as the leader of the Congo, in other words, is to maintain a sense of unity and national pride: he has to persuade the many different tribes that they now share a common identity.

Anatole continues to explain the situation to Leah: Moise Tshombe has Belgians working for him. There are wars going on throughout the country, as various tribes try to secede from the new country. Each tribe is trying to cement its claim to its natural resources—diamonds, rubber, etc. Lumumba, on the other hand, wants to share the Congo's natural resources with all of his people—he wants the diamond mines in the north to pay for schools and hospitals in the south, for example.

Lumumba's conflict with the tribes of the Congo illustrates a conflict between two different economic systems: capitalism, as represented by the tribes trying to monopolize their own resources, and socialism, as represented by Lumumba's attempts to share the resources of the country. This reminds us that Lumumba hardly speaks for all the people in his country: although he's fighting for Congolese independence from Belgium, he's also fighting for control of his own people.

Leah asks Anatole if the U.S. will intervene to prevent civil war. Anatole says that the U.S. is dragging its feet, and Lumumba is threatening to ask the Soviet Union for help instead. Anatole also begins to explain the concept of Communism to Leah. He defines it as the belief that everyone should have the same property.

Anatole teaches Leah about the basics of Communism—an ideology that Leah is only dimly aware of. Leah, as an American, has been taught that Communism is evil, but Anatole bills it as the most innocent of ideas: the idea that property should be equal.

Leah mentions that Axelroot dislikes Lumumba, and Anatole tells Leah that he thinks Axelroot is "trouble in his own stinking hat." This makes Leah laugh. She tells Anatole that she loved watching Lumumba speak, even if she couldn't understand all of what he said. With this, Anatole bids Leah farewell, and Leah returns to Ruth May, who seems listless and tired. Leah realizes that there's a very real chance that she could lose her little sister forever.

Axelroot and Anatole are practically opposites: Anatole is principled, educated, and generous, while Axelroot is strategic, self-interested, and amoral—he'll sell his services to the highest bidder. Both Axelroot and Anatole have offered their help to Ruth May, but it might be the case that neither one can save the child.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 32

Ruth May is confined to bed, where she has feverish dreams about black children playing with her in the night. She sees Nathan yelling, "God will know the difference," and she sees Rachel falling to the ground.

Ruth May is becoming more and more alienated from her father, and the line between reality and dreams is blurring for her as well.

Ruth May wakes up from her delirium and sees Nelson sitting in front of her. Nelson tells Ruth May to place her "spirit" inside a tiny matchbox. There's a picture of a lion on the side of the box. Nelson explains that this box will protect Ruth May's soul, so that even if her body dies, her soul will be fine.

We think that this is really happening, but it's also possible that it's just a dream. Nelson introduces a spiritual side into the novel—from hereon, Ruth May will be heavily associated with spirituality and mysticism.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 33

While Ruth May continues to be sick, Orleanna gets better. Leah wonders if she's accidentally made Ruth May sicker, so she prays to God, apologizing for her own sister's disease. Meanwhile, Rachel continues cooking and cleaning for her sisters. Leah and Rachel argue: Leah criticizes Rachel for being a bad cook and heating the fire too hot, and Rachel lashes out, telling Leah that she should be silent, like Adah.

Leah's reaction to Ruth May's sickness is very telling: she blames herself for no discernible reason. We've already seen Leah blaming herself for things beyond her control (her whiteness, her nationality, Methuselah's cursing, etc.).

Orleanna seems different now that she's had a brush with deadly disease. She speaks her mind to Nathan more often, and seems more energetic. This makes Leah more eager to question Nathan's authority as well—she wonders where women fit into heaven. She also begins to realize that in Nathan's ideal world, a woman's intelligence doesn't count for anything; she's judged for her beauty and nothing else. Leah wonders what kind of God would send her family to the Congo, a dangerous place.

Interestingly, the presence of danger in the Price women's lives inspires them to stand up to Nathan more and more frequently. Leah really begins to doubt her father's wisdom here—she can see that Nathan doesn't respect strong, intelligent women in the slightest. And because Nathan is so inextricably tied to religious faith for Leah, questioning Nathan also means questioning God.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 34

Rachel is "slaving over a hot stove" when a group of people come running by. They're eager to see "Mr. Bird," though Rachel doesn't know what this means. An old white man then appears outside the Price house, and introduces himself as Mr. Bird. Orleanna isn't sure what to make of all this, but she invites Bird and his wife, a tall Congolese woman named Celine, into the house.

Rachel has been stepping up, taking on various leadership roles. But as we can see right away, she's doing this in part to be dramatic—to get some respect for herself, not because she genuinely wants to help her family members.

Ruth May (who's been feeling better lately) greets "Mr. Bird" with curiosity. Bird is calm and thoughtful. He explains that little has changed in the Congo since he was a missionary here. Bird proceeds to talk with Leah about the Bible. He points out that the Bible is the product of man as well as God, because it's been translated and reinterpreted so many times by different people (Matthew, John, King James, etc.). Leah and Orleanna seem impressed with Bird's freethinking ways. Bird explains that he has a large family, with many children.

Mr. Bird is a fascinating character—he has the same profession as Nathan, and yet he seems to be Nathan's opposite in every way. Where Nathan trusts the Bible with a rigid, unchanging faith, Mr. Bird believes that the Bible must be adjusted to suit the needs of man. Bird is also a true family man, in contrast to Nathan (who, as we've seen, is basically indifferent to his family).

Nathan returns to the house, and greets Mr. Bird. Bird reveals himself to be Brother Fowles—Nathan's predecessor in the village. Fowles seems more relaxed and easy-going than Nathan. He also mentions his respect for Tata Ndu, Nathan's great rival for authority in the village. Nathan asks Fowles what he's been up to, and Fowles replies that he's been "rejoicing in the work of the Lord." Nathan, who clearly dislikes Fowles' personality, quotes a Bible verse about salvation, and Fowles names the chapter and verse without batting an eye. In spite of himself, Nathan is impressed.

Unlike Nathan, Fowles respects Tata Ndu—a pragmatic gesture more than anything else (Fowles seems to understand that it's impossible to be successful in the village without getting the chief on your side). Fowles is also clearly a more intelligent and educated man than Nathan. This obviously bothers Nathan, who likes to pass himself off as a great authority on the Bible.

Nathan and Fowles begin a subtle contest in which Nathan quotes a Bible verse and Fowles expounds upon it, showing off his knowledge. Fowles uses his knowledge of the Bible to argue that the un-saved people of the Congo are still God's children. Nathan counters that they are "enemies of God." Fowles talks about the beauty of the natural world, and Nathan seems to get madder and madder.

This is an interesting scene, because it suggests that Fowles, for all his virtues, isn't above showing off or competing. He knows he's antagonizing Nathan, and seems to take pleasure in showing up his opponent.

Rachel notices that Nathan isn't trying to make Fowles feel the least bit welcome in the house, and Fowles ends up leaving instead of staying for dinner. He leaves Adah with some books, and also offers some supplies to Orleanna. Before he goes, he tells Orleanna that he gets funding from the ABFMS, the American Baptist Foreign Mission Service. Orleanna points out that her family isn't Baptist, but Fowles suggests, "There are Christians and there are Christians."

Fowles clearly believes in a looser interpretation of religion than Nathan would ever adopt for himself—he believes that the specific differences between different sects (and, perhaps, different religions) are less important than the commonalities between them: the emphasis on love, compassion, and respect.

Before Fowles leaves, Orleanna asks him about Ruth May's fever. Fowles admits that there are few good doctors around, but Celine suggests that the Prices talk to Tata Ndu, a man of "surprising resources." Fowles's last question, before he walks out, is about how Methuselah is doing. Ruth May explains that Methuselah has gone to "bird heaven," and Fowles replies that this is the best place for the "little bastard." This shocks and delights the Price children.

Fowles is a more likable figure than Nathan—he's more "down to earth" and more willing to break and bend a few rules along the way through life. Fowles is an important character because he shows that there's nothing automatically negative about being a missionary—it's perfectly possible to preach the gospels while also being compassionate and friendly.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 35

Ruth May's condition gets worse once again, even though she'd been improving immediately before Reverend Fowles's visit. Taking Fowles's advice, the Prices asks Tata Ndu to visit their home. He enters the house, bearing gifts: fresh antelope meat, a basket, etc. Ndu returns to the Price house many times, always complimenting Nathan's daughters, but after a month of this, the Prices still aren't sure how to ask him for help. Finally, Orleanna tells Ndu that she doesn't want him catching a disease from Ruth May; this is her way of asking what's going on.

Fowles's advice is a great example of how a religious figure doesn't have to limit himself or herself to spiritual advice—just because Fowles might disagree with Tata Ndu's beliefs doesn't mean that he can't recommend Ndu to the Prices, or respect Ndu for his power and experience as a leader of Kilanga. It's unclear what Ndu is doing in the Prices' house, especially because of the antipathy he'd previously expressed to Nathan.

One day, Nelson realizes what Tata Ndu has in mind. He wants a wife for himself—this is why he's been bringing gifts to the house. Ndu has his heart set on Rachel. As Nelson puts it, he wants to "buy" Rachel from Nathan. Nelson also explains that he likes Rachel because he thinks her fair complexion will be interesting for his *other* wives. Orleanna says, "You make it sound like she's an accessory he needs to go with his outfit."

Just because Tata Ndu doesn't like Nathan doesn't mean he's not attracted to Rachel's beauty. And yet Ndu's attitude toward Rachel is like that of a collector to his possessions—as Orleanna points out, Rachel is just an accessory for him, just a way to compliment his other wives. Ndu may be Nathan's rival, but they seem to have similarly demeaning ideas about women.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 36

Leah explains the Prices' problem: if they turn down Tata Ndu's offer of marriage, Ndu will be very offended. This wouldn't be good for the Prices, since Ndu is such a powerful leader. Meanwhile, Leah comments on the system of government in the village: the Belgians had always used a voting system, but the villagers didn't like this. As they saw it, democracy could leave 49 people out of 100 unhappy, simply because of the 51 other people. Instead of democracy, the villagers make deals with each other, until everyone is somewhat satisfied.

The Prices are in a genuine moral dilemma: they need to survive with Tata Ndu's blessing, but they also don't want Rachel getting married to him. The moral ambiguity of this decision mirrors the ambiguity of the election process: there's no "right answer," just the answer that pleases the most people. And yet the people of Kilanga don't practice democracy; they prefer a localized system in which everyone reaches one compromise.

Rachel is furious about the possibility of marrying Tata Ndu. Whenever Tata Ndu visits from now on, she makes herself scarce. Orleanna and Nathan hit on the idea of pretending that Rachel is engaged to Eeben Axelroot. Word gets out that Rachel is "taken," and Ndu stops visiting.

As in Leah's explanation of voting, the Prices hit on a solution that is somewhat satisfying for everyone in the community: Tata Ndu is saddened but not offended by the information that Rachel is already engaged, and meanwhile the Prices get to continue living in Kilanga, albeit without the gifts from Ndu.

Meanwhile, Ruth May isn't doing well—she has horrible rashes all over her body. One day, the Prices are sweeping around Ruth May's bed, and Orleanna discovers a huge number of malaria pills lying under the bed. There are 61 pills, exactly the number of weeks that the Prices have been in the Congo.

Clearly Ruth May hasn't been taking her pills, explaining why she's been so sickly lately—she probably has malaria.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 37

Rachel has been spending time with Axelroot to create the impression that they're engaged. Just as the Prices planned, Ndu has been avoiding Rachel, allowing Axelroot to "court" Rachel. Rachel admits that Axelroot can be "halfway decent." She's planning to convince him to fly her away from Africa. In fact, Orleanna has already offered Axelroot her wedding ring, plus a thousand dollars, if he'll get them all out of the Congo.

As the situation in the Congo becomes increasingly unstable, the Prices resort to more desperate strategies to keep themselves safe. Orleanna's decision to offer her wedding ring as payment to Axelroot is a clear symbol of her decision to break away from her husband: she's literally and metaphorically rejecting her marriage to Nathan in the interest of protecting her children.

Rachel tells Axelroot stories about her childhood and high school. These stories are nothing compared to the ones Axelroot tells her, however. Rachel learns that Axelroot is an important figure in the Congo; he claims to know the CIA Deputy Chief, various Congo chiefs, etc. He also claims to have U.S. protection. Orleanna asks Rachel about Axelroot, but she doesn't share these secrets.

It would seem that Axelroot is actually working for the CIA, and can predict important events that'll happen in the Congo (such as Lumumba's death). Without direct control like the Belgians had, the U.S. must use insiders like Axelroot to act in their interests.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 38

Ruth May isn't sure if Rachel is going to marry Tata Ndu or not. She's heard that Rachel is considering marrying Axelroot, instead. Ruth May doesn't like this, since she finds Axelroot mean. Tata Ndu continues to come to the house to ask about Rachel. He explains to Nathan that Rachel must be taken to be "cut" so that she won't try to "run around with other people's husbands." Nathan is appalled by this information, and shares it with Orleanna. Ruth May is confused, thinking, "Since when did he care about protecting young ladies?"

Ruth May is too young to keep the secret of Rachel's engagement, so her family doesn't tell her anything about Rachel—they just leave her to figure it out for herself. This is a disturbing section, because it alludes to female genital mutilation—a common practice in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Female genital mutilation is often cited as an example of extreme misogyny in non-Western culture (Alice Walker alludes to it in this way in The Color Purple).

Orleanna insists that Ruth May take her malaria pills. Ruth May has been avoiding taking the pills because she finds them disgusting. Meanwhile, the doctor in Stanleyville has removed her cast. Ruth May wonders if God is punishing her for being bad: for trying to see Nelson naked, not taking her pills, etc.

Ruth May continues to live in fear of God—Nathan has impressed upon her the idea that someone is always watching her and judging her. Because of the way the chapter is structured, the message is clear enough: many cultures try to limit female sexuality in dangerous, misogynist ways.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 39

Rachel is now 17 years old. She has a subdued birthday—her second in the Congo. On her first birthday in the Congo, Orleanna cried, but didn't give her any nice presents, and Rachel thought this was the worst birthday she'd ever have. On this second birthday, however, her siblings have forgotten it's her birthday at all. Orleanna remembers, and gives Rachel a pair of earrings and a bracelet. Rachel thanks Orleanna, but is dismayed when Orleanna then returns to taking care of Ruth May.

It's somewhat funny that this chapter arrives right after the previous one, as Rachel's anxieties seem so petty compared with Ruth May's, and Ruth May is only five years old.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 40

Nathan has changed his tune in church, and now he tries to work Congolese phrases into his sermons. One Sunday, he says, "Tata Jesus is bangala," but he pronounces "bangala" in such a way that it means "poisonwood." Meanwhile, Ruth May makes a quick recovery from her disease, and yet Nathan seems strangely indifferent to the news. Ruth May seems quiet and subdued, and she doesn't spend time with Nelson anymore.

Nathan continues to be oblivious to the true meaning of what he's telling the Congolese people. The word "bangala," meaning both "good" and "poisonwood," acts as an apt symbol for the arrogance and misunderstanding of imperialism and dogma. Ruth May seems to be frightened of Nelson—Nathan's lessons about avoiding nakedness have touched a nerve with her.

Everyone in the village thinks Rachel is actually engaged to Eeben Axelroot. Meanwhile, Leah has begun studying languages with Anatole, and she also teaches Anatole's students in the mornings. As a show of thanks, Anatole gives Leah a bow and quiver of arrows. Adah feels alienated from Leah, especially because Anatole is "breaking rules for her." Oblivious to the ramifications of her actions, Leah attends church carrying her bow and arrow.

Adah and Leah don't talk much in this novel—Leah, in spite of sharing a complete set of DNA with Adah, has completely different interests and problems from her twin. Here, we see Leah taking a major step toward becoming her own person—she gains a symbolic bow and arrow, a traditional symbol of women's power and intelligence (as with the Ancient Greek goddess Artemis).

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 41

Leah studies Anatole's face as she studies her French in the schoolhouse. She can't help but wonder if Anatole hates her for being white, but instead she asks why the children in class hate her. Anatole explains that the children are just "naughty," but Leah isn't convinced. Anatole sighs and explains that the boys don't trust her because she's a woman, and a white woman at that.

Leah hates herself for being white: she recognizes that white people have destroyed entire civilizations, and impoverished vast stretches of the Congo. For this reason, Leah feels guilty about her own identity.

Anatole goes on to explain that the children distrust all Americans, because they think of America as the most powerful nation in the world, one that is deliberately starving the Congo. When Leah says that this is ridiculous, Anatole explains that the Congolese "do things differently." In the village, everyone shares their food and money with everyone else—even if they hate their peers. In other words, the Congolese don't save up their money and supplies, even if this means they'll never be rich. This doesn't mean that there aren't rich men in the village—Tata Ndu is rich enough to "afford" six wives—but it's usually accepted that rich men "need" more money because of their difficult work. Anatole points out that Leah's country could easily spare a few cars and some radios for the Congolese. Leah isn't sure how to respond to this.

Anatole gives an eloquent (and perhaps slightly idealistic) argument for the Congo's economic systems—according to him, the Congolese believe in equality and the equal distribution of resources. Anatole makes it seem like the Congo is a traditionally egalitarian country—that the desire to minimize property is as old as the Congolese people themselves. In this, Anatole foreshadows the American government's covert actions in the Congo, conducted in the interests of opposing Communism there.

Leah tries to describe life in the U.S. to Anatole. She says that most people live in cities, but Anatole can barely believe this, pointing out that a country with no farms could never last long. Leah can only say, "things are different from here." She also asks Anatole why he's been translating Nathan's sermons. Anatole explains that he's been doing his duty. Leah presses the point, insisting that Anatole clearly isn't enthusiastic about Nathan's Christian mission. Anatole laughs and asks Leah what Nathan is trying to accomplish in the Congo. Leah claims that Nathan is bringing Christianity to the Congo.

Anatole knows a great deal about his own culture and about world history, and yet he's not knowledgeable about the lifestyle of American people. It's interesting that Leah continues to defend Nathan, even after she's had ample evidence of the fact that he has no reason to be in the Congo; perhaps it's hard for her to give up her faith in her father, and in her God.

Leah and Anatole continue discussing Nathan. Anatole admits that he doesn't believe in Jesus Christ's divinity—he trusts knowledge, math, and science instead. Anatole calls Leah "beene," which means "truth," and Leah blushes. Anatole tells Leah that he'd love to see a map of the entire world, and Leah is amazed that Anatole has never seen a globe. She tells him that in the U.S., lots of people have globes in their houses. She volunteers to make Anatole a globe from memory.

Leah and Anatole strike up a relationship in which both teach the other new information: Anatole is genuinely excited that Leah can make him a globe, and Leah is genuinely interested in Anatole's lessons about history and science. While Anatole is older than Leah, his relationship with her is hardly one of teacher and student; they seem like intellectual equals, and also friends potentially falling in love.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 42

After Rachel's birthday, Axelroot visits her and takes her for a walk to keep up the appearance that they're engaged. Axelroot makes Rachel laugh by joking about Rachel's sisters, and he mentions that Adah spies on her from time to time. He offers Rachel a Lucky Strike cigarette, and Rachel smokes it, laughing. Axelroot claims he can get Rachel cigarettes any time she wants.

Axelroot knows perfectly well that he has a lot of power over Rachel; he can get her to do things for him because he's keeping her secret from Tata Ndu. There's also definitely an attempted seduction going on here.

Axelroot and Rachel walk by a large group of women returning from the field. Axelroot flirts with them, calling them "ladies of Kilanga." This offends Rachel, and she tells herself never to forget that Axelroot is a "creep." Axelroot tries to apologize, but this makes Rachel even more annoyed.

Axelroot apologizes, but he also knows he doesn't have to hide anything from Rachel—he most of the power right now, so Rachel has to continue spending time with him whether he flirts with others or not.

Axelroot changes the subject to politics. He tells Rachel a secret—Lumumba, the Prime Minister, is as good as dead. He will be assassinated very soon, and Axelroot will have "orders" to perform immediately afterwards. Rachel is confused about Axelroot's explanation, and can't help but feeling sorry for Axelroot, as she assumes he's exaggerating to impress her.

For the time being, Rachel seems not to grasp how powerful and well-connected Axelroot really is. In part, this is a product of her narcissism—it's easier for her to believe that Axelroot is obsessively trying to impress her than it is to believe that he's a powerful CIA ally.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 43

Adah watches the sunset and thinks about the children who have died in the village. Whenever a child dies, Nathan goes to visit the child's parents and tries to explain how the parents could have saved the child's soul by baptizing it.

Nathan's approach to death only increases the pain to the deceased's family—he uses the tragedy to try and make the parents feel guilty. Without saying so, it's obvious that Orleanna finds this unconscionable.

Adah has been spying on Axelroot, and whenever she listens to his radio, she hears the phrase "good as dead" to describe Patrice Lumumba. She gets the idea that President Eisenhower wants Lumumba dead. Adah is amazed that "Ike"—seemingly a kind, grandfatherly man—is secretly murderous.

It's often surprising for people to learn about the U.S. government's covert actions during the Cold War, whether in the Congo or in any number of other countries. Partly, this is because most American presidents, like Eisenhower, provide a very different image to the public.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 44

Late at night, Leah wakes up to the sound of cries from the streets. She rushes outside, where she sees that the street is full of ants. Anatole, who's nearby, shouts out to Leah. He touches her hand and tells her that he'll go alert Leah's family to the danger. Leah is embarrassed that she walked out of the house without alerting Adah to the ants—she's betrayed her "other half."

This is a major turning point in the novel, and one of the highpoints of Kingsolver's prose. Leah has been growing apart from Adah throughout her time in Africa, and here, we get a sense for just how wide the divide has become. Leah feels pangs of guilt, of course—she seems to be a naturally guilty person.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 45

Rachel wakes up in the middle of the night to the sound of frenzy. She rushes out of her room, but not before grabbing her mirror, the one thing in the house she wants to save. In the streets, she runs as fast as she can, toward the river. As she runs, she sees ants swarming everywhere. Once she's at the river, she wades out into the water, while other villagers climb into boats. Rachel realizes that she's dropped her mirror along the way to the river. Thinking back on the night, Rachel reports that her family "left me, just flat left me."

Leah feels as if she has abandoned Adah, and Rachel feels abandoned by the whole family. It's also telling that Rachel loses her mirror—a symbol of vanity, and something she can't afford to cling to if she wants to survive in Kilanga.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 46

Ruth May describes the scene in the village: everyone screams as they run away from the ants. Orleanna is holding Ruth May very tightly as she runs along, all the way to the boats on the river.

As we've seen so far, it's Orleanna's first instinct to protect her children; specifically her youngest child. The question of which *child Orleanna must choose, however, will become more important later on.*

Ruth May and Orleanna reach the river, where they see Adah. Orleanna moves to talk to Adah, and suddenly Ruth May feels someone else "had a hold of me." She remembers Nelson advising her to "think of a good place to go," so that she'll be able to go there when she die. Ruth May thinks of being a green snake in a tree, protecting the tribes of "Ham, Shem, and Japheth" together. Snakes are the safest of all creatures, she thinks.

This is an important bit of foreshadowing, as Ruth May feels a connection to a green snake. Ruth May's perceptions of the world blur the line between dream and reality, and yet there's a kind of spiritual truth in the way she can sympathize with all other beings, no matter how strange.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 47

Adah tries to make sense of what she saw the night of the ants. She could easily have been eaten alive by the ants—luckily, however, she was able to wake up and move away just in time. Orleanna carried Ruth May out of the house, saying that Nathan had already run out. Adah tries to keep up with Orleanna and her sisters, but she's too slow. She feels someone lift her up and carry her toward the river. As she reaches the river, she realizes that it's Anatole. Immediately after the episode, Adah wonders why her mother did not help her, but chose Ruth May instead. "Now," however, she doesn't wonder at all. Instead, Adah thinks of how she tried to save herself.

Even in a moment of crisis, Adah is surprisingly dispassionate. This doesn't mean that she doesn't try to save herself, and yet when Adah looks back on the incident, she doesn't linger on how Orleanna didn't choose to save her (i.e., how she chose Ruth May instead). Instead, Adah learns to focus on herself; she refuses to rely on anybody. This is poignant: we get the idea that Adah is forcing herself to be self-sufficient because she believes that she has to be.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 48

Leah rushes toward the river, noticing that Anatole is behind her, carrying Adah. He explains that Orleanna and Ruth May have gone ahead with Tata Boanda. Rachel, Anatole says, is a "demon," and Nathan is even now sermonizing about the ants. Leah quietly asks Anatole if this is all God's will. Anatole is quiet, then says, "No."

The crisis in Kilanga helps the characters unlock some of their secret thoughts and passions. Here, for example, Anatole finally admits what Leah had already suspected about him: he doesn't believe in God at all.

Leah is inspired to ask Anatole, point-blank, about his politics. She points out that he's involved with the Jeune Mou Pro, and asks him if he believes that violence is necessary to achieve peace. Anatole tells Leah that she's too young to understand the truth about the world. He tells her that she and her family should never have come to the Congo. The other villagers support the Prices at all times: even now, the villagers are rowing Nathan across the river, and for the last few months, the neighbors have been placing extra eggs in the Prices' chicken house to feed them.

This chapter is full of revealed secrets. Here, we see a rule of life in Kilanga: the villagers must take care of guests, but never admit what they're doing. Anatole can't stand to keep up the charade any longer, particularly because Nathan has been so contemptuous of Kilanga's people. For this reason, he reveals that the Prices have been dependent on the villagers for months now.

Suddenly, Leah begins to cry. She says, "I love you, Anatole." Anatole replies, "Don't ever say that again." Leah notes to herself, "I never will." Two days later, the Prices return to their home to find that the ants have devoured the chickens, leaving only their bones.

Anatole certainly seems interested in Leah, and yet he's unwilling to reciprocate her love—perhaps because he feels it would be too dangerous for them to be together. Nevertheless, everything is on the table now—in fact, the spectacle of chickens stripped to the bones might be intended to reflect the way Anatole and Leah have had the truth laid bare here.

BOOK 4, CHAPTER 49

Orleanna speculates about a "chance meeting" between a Belgian and an American. During this meeting, the two foreigners might have negotiated about their businesses, their politics, etc. Then, they might have decided how to divide up the Congo. The Belgian and the American would have treated the Congo like a game of chess, with Lumumba the "black king"—too dangerous to be allowed to live for long. Then, they would have chosen a successor, a young man named Joseph Mobutu.

Orleanna provides her usual gloss on politics and international relations in Africa. There's a major change in the Congo, but it's not the change we'd suspected. While the Europeans have ceased to exercise much control over the Congo anymore, a new foreign power is now taking control: the U.S. The U.S. doesn't actually install mines and rubber factories in the country, but it nonetheless exerts enormous power over the Congo's government.

In 1975, Orleanna notes, a group of U.S. senators looked into the CIA's actions in the Congo, and found that the Eisenhower administration had agreed that Lumumba was a threat to the supremacy of the U.S. Allen Dulles, the head of the CIA at the time, organized an assassination, which would ensure that Lumumba would either die or be unfit to lead others.

In this ugly "marriage of convenience," the U.S. government decides that it's better off with a pro-capitalist dictator like Mobutu than with a democratic socialist like Lumumba. There were similar regime changes made in Indonesia, Chile, Cuba, Iran, etc. throughout the Cold War.

On the day that the CIA condemned Lumumba to die, Ruth May was feverish and Rachel was turning 17. The CIA told Mobutu that he would have America's blessing when he seized power. Shortly afterwards, Lumumba was suddenly arrested, savagely beaten, and allowed to die of his wounds. Now, the Congo was in the control of "soulless, empty men."

Orleanna parallels the changes in the Price family with the changes in the Congo: both are moving into an uncertain future. It's worth noting that Lumumba was actually executed by a firing squad.

Orleanna sometimes wonders if there was a way that Lumumba's life could have been saved. But she always comes to the same conclusion—it's useless thinking "what if." If she hadn't married Nathan, for example, she would never have had her beautiful daughters.

Orleanna's tone is regretful and bitter, and yet she also acknowledges that there's nothing helpful about regret. One can't fixate too much on the mistakes of the past, because it's impossible to fix them.

BOOK 4, CHAPTER 50

It's been a tough couple of months for the Prices, with the drought, Ruth May's illness, and the ants. Lately, Leah has also been unimpressed with Nathan's enthusiasm for the Bible. One Sunday in church, Nathan delivers a sermon, and afterwards someone in the congregation asks about the upcoming election. Nathan is confused, until Tata Ndu explains that the people of the village will be "voting" on Jesus Christ. Nathan is furious. He will not allow Christ's divinity to be put to vote, he claims. Nevertheless, the villagers ignore him, and proceed to vote with colored pebbles. Nathan is shaking with anger, and Leah prays that he "will never lay a hand on me again."

This is a funny scene, because Tata Ndu is being more Western than Nathan the Westerner. Ndu, both consciously and unconsciously, is pointing out some of the contradictions in the condescending idea of imposing democracy or Christianity through imperialism and force. The humor of the scene is undercut by the reminder that Nathan hits his children.

Tata Ndu orders his villagers to proceed with their voting, despite Nathan's urgings to the contrary. Ndu points out that elections are a "white tradition," which Nathan must abide by. In the end, Christ "loses" the vote, 11 to 56.

This scene, comic though it is, parallels the larger, tragic situation of the Congo at the time: a vote was held, electing Lumumba to head the nation, and yet the Western powers refused to abide by their own democratic laws.

BOOK 4, CHAPTER 51

Rachel claims that Leah is the cause of the Prices' problems. Lately, Leah has been talking back to Nathan—a sharp change from her old behavior. One day, Leah declares that she'll go hunting with her bow and arrow. She's going to join Tata Ndu, who's organizing a village-wide hunt to stave off the effects of the drought in the Congo. Leah has been practicing with the bow and arrow that Anatole gave her, and she's become pretty good.

This passage shows how the crisis with the ants has galvanized Leah into disobeying her father with more bravery. Leah has been questioning her father's authority for some time now, but it took a genuine crisis for her to disobey him altogether. She seems more loyal to Anatole than to Nathan now.

Leah's participation in the hunt was the subject of much debate. Her friends Nelson and Anatole argued on her behalf, saying that the village was too desperate to spare any archers, whether they were female or male. Tata Kuvudundu, the witch doctor, on the other hand, argued that horrible things happen whenever people break "the rules"; i.e., when women go hunting. After much arguing, Tata Ndu called for a meeting, and the agreement was that Leah was allowed to hunt.

Once again, we see the community dividing along sexist lines: there are some who would see Leah participate in the hunt, and others who refuse to allow such a thing. While traditionalists like Tata Kuvudundu oppose breaking the rules, in the end it's just more practical to let a talented archer hunt.

Nathan was adamantly opposed to Leah's hunting. He warned her that she must not participate, no matter what the vote was. Leah accused Nathan of siding with a witch doctor against his own daughter, and this infuriated Nathan. He removed his belt, as if to beat her, but before he could she ran away. In the coming days, Leah makes herself scarce, staying mostly at Anatole's school, where she continues to help the children.

Leah is becoming conscious of the forces of sexism in the world. There is no neat divide between Africans and Americans on all issues—on the contrary, there are some Africans, such as Kuvudundu, who have more in common with Nathan than she does.

BOOK 4, CHAPTER 52

The night before the big hunt in the village, nobody sleeps—everyone is too excited. Early in the morning, Tata Ndu assembles his hunters. There are hunters with torches, bows, spears, and sticks. Some of the villagers have come to clear the grass with heavy sticks, thereby drawing the animals out into the open.

The hunt is a ritual for the entire community: everybody's involved, whether as a hunter or only a helper.

The hunters venture out into the forest. Adah joins some of the elderly women, who carry ceremonial torches. Orleanna and Ruth May also walk along, surveying the hunters' progress. Men light most of the forest on fire, leading to cries of pain from the animals in the trees.

It makes sense that Adah would see the hunt as a big, complicated process, in which everyone plays a part. She's already analyzed the Congo itself in exactly these terms, and in general, her scientific turn of mind helps her see the connections between seemingly unrelated things.

Adah thinks back on this day in her life with amusement and admiration—this was the day when she realized a simple truth: humans are animals, too, competing for food and water. In the end, the survival of one animal is always commensurate with the death of a different animal—this is the one unbreakable law of the living world.

Adah draws a broader conclusion from her time in the hunt: there's no such thing as a moment for celebration, at least as it's usually understood. One being's happiness always rests on another being's unhappiness: the hunters celebrate their victory at the cost of animals' lives. One could say nearly the same of the Belgian colonists: their prosperity rested upon the misery of the Congolese.

BOOK 4, CHAPTER 53

During the hunt, Leah killed her first game—a "beautiful tawny beast." Leah is overjoyed with her success, but during the hunt itself, she was terrified. She had to chase the animal, an impala, through the trees after she shot it. The other hunters are impressed with Leah's archery. However, Tata Ndu's son, Gbenye, claims that he killed the impala. Nelson defends Leah, saying that he witnessed her shot. Nelson calls Gbenye a "woman" for his poor archery—Leah finds this offensive.

Leah is flushed with success after killing an impala, and yet she gets a harsh reminder that the sexism of her community is still very much in place. Even though she's proved herself to be a capable female archer, even small children like Nelson still have a sexist worldview deeply ingrained in them.

BOOK 4, CHAPTER 54

Rachel finds the hunt disgusting. She vows never to eat meat ever again. She's especially horrified at the thought of her sisters enjoying the roast game, licking blood and fat from their lips.

Rachel's impressions of the hunt are very different from her sisters'—she refuses to even try to understand the complex ideas and cultural patterns at work.

BOOK 4, CHAPTER 55

Leah thinks back to the day of the hunt—a day that should have been glorious, but wasn't. She'll remember what happened for the rest of her life.

The chapter begins on a note of regret, paralleling the tone we've heard coming from Orleanna in her retrospective chapters.

The hunt ends, and the villagers celebrate by dancing and shouting. Ruth May is scared of the celebration and hides in Orleanna's arms. Meanwhile, a few of the hunters, led by Tata Kuvudundu, argue that Leah shouldn't have been hunting at all, in spite of her talent with a bow. When the time comes to divide up the meat, Tata Ndu cuts up the meat and throws a portion to Leah. Instead of accepting it, Leah throws it back, refusing her share out of pride.

As we'd already seen (via Nelson's insult to Gbenye), the village of Kilanga is still full of sexist traditions. Leah behaves stubbornly in this scene; she's almost behaving like Nathan, refusing to compromise on her principles. Tata Kuvudundu seems like a fitting rival for Nathan—he clings to his own rigid set of rules, and dislikes seeing women empowered.

When it comes time for Anatole to receive his share of the meat, Anatole claims that he's earned an entire buck for himself—a larger share of meat than Ndu is offering him. Suddenly, Tata Boanda tries to wrestle the bushbuck out of Anatole's hands—Boanda clams that it was he, not Anatole, who shot it. A big argument breaks out, with everyone in the village taking sides. As the fighting escalates, the Prices take their share of meat, reversing Leah's stubbornness, and return to their house. Leah notices Tata Kuvudundu, shouting about how the animals will "rise up" against the village.

One could take this scene as a metaphor for capitalism itself, or as foreshadowing what's going to come to the Congo as a whole. The sudden changes in the village, coupled with the presence of unfamiliar people like Leah, compels people to argue and greedily claim more than they deserve. This reminds us that Anatole's claims for his community—i.e., that in Kilanga everybody takes their fair share and nothing more—were idealistic, to say the least: where there are humans, there's always greed.

BOOK 4, CHAPTER 56

In the evening, the Price sisters return to their home, and Rachel prepares to announce that she's a vegetarian. But within a few moments, she gives in and begins eating antelope meat. She watches as Leah and Nathan wage a "war" with each other. Nathan tells Leah that she's disobeyed him, meaning that she's not even worth punishing. Leah acts cool, knowing in her heart that she's done an impressive thing by killing the antelope. Orleanna is clearly on Leah's side—she doesn't speak, but she stacks the plates noisily, showing her anger with Nathan.

Rachel has no real convictions: she even breaks her own promise to be a vegetarian. This section is also a good example of how Nathan's wife and children can resist his tyranny without openly fighting back. In a notable shift of allegiances, Leah seems to have abandoned any respect she had for her father.

Suddenly, Nelson runs into the house, saying that he saw an "X" shape in the chicken house—a traditional omen of danger in the future. Nathan sternly tells Nelson that he's been worshipping "false idols." Nelson goes back out to the chicken house, very glum. Leah, sympathetic to Nelson, decides to go outside to help him defeat the "omen." She asks her sisters if they'll help her, but nobody answers. Then Adah gets up to give Leah a hand.

Nathan, proud as ever, refuses to accept other traditions or systems of belief, even when they could help him protect his own family.

Outside, Leah and Adah help Nelson, who's seen a snake near the chicken house, and is suspicious that there's been an intruder in the area. They build a pathway made of fine ash and dirt. Then they send Nelson to stay with Anatole. This way, if any humans set foot near the chicken house, Leah and Adah will see their footsteps.

We can tell that someone is going to come by the chicken house before long: the Prices have made so many enemies in their community that someone will try to sabotage them.

BOOK 4, CHAPTER 57

Adah, Nelson, and Leah wake up early the next morning, hoping to catch the supposed intruder in their chicken house. To their surprise, they think they see a figure entering the area. A few moments later they creep to the chicken house, where they see a bright green mamba snake and a footprint, showing a six-toed left foot.

We remember that Tata Kuvudundu has six toes on one foot—clearly, he's snuck into the chicken house and placed the snake there. Based on what we've seen of Kuvudundu lately, we can surmise that he's angry with Leah for hunting, and with the Prices in general for disrupting life and order in Kilanga.

BOOK 4, CHAPTER 58

Leah, staring at the chicken house, hears a sudden gulp—it's Ruth May, who's secretly been climbing the trees above the chicken house. Ruth May falls down, and Nelson rushes to her. He notices that she's swollen and sickly-looking, and sees two small puncture wounds in her skin—she's been bitten by the green mamba snake. Leah is terrified by this sight, to the point where she's too frightened to move, even when Nelson screams for her to get help.

This is arguably the climax of the novel, as Ruth may falls from a tree for the last time, and the forces in Kilanga who wanted to destroy the Prices have their revenge. Tragically, Nelson shows his love for Ruth May in this moment as well, but it's now too late.

BOOK 4, CHAPTER 59

Adah notes that she was not present when Ruth May was born, but she was there when Ruth May died. She sees her little sister take her final breaths, her face turning blue. With this, Ruth May's life ends.

Adah is calm, dispassionate even, as she describes her sister's death. Paradoxically, her calmness makes the death scene even more emotional.

BOOK 4, CHAPTER 60

Rachel has just learned from Leah and Adah that Ruth May is dead. Rachel, as the eldest child, decides that she will tell her parents of the accident. It's extremely early in the morning, and she's scared of what she's about to say to Orleanna and Nathan.

Interestingly, it's Rachel who steps up to tell Orleanna about Ruth May's death—for all her superficiality and immaturity, she has certain duties as the eldest child, and she knows it.

Rachel has spent the last year pretending that her life in the Congo isn't real. But now that Ruth May is gone, she can't pretend anymore—her sister's death brings home the shocking reality of her life in Africa.

Rachel survives by holding herself aloof from her community and the people around her. But there are certain things that are simply too big to ignore.

BOOK 4, CHAPTER 61

Leah describes how Orleanna takes the news of Ruth May's death. She's eerily calm, as if she already knew what had happened. Nathan's reaction is different—he says that Ruth May wasn't baptized yet. Leah finds this reaction pathetic—how can her father focus on a thing that that? Leah believes that Nathan hadn't baptized Ruth May because he wanted to make a great show of the baptism, and was waiting for the proper time.

Once again, the eerie calmness of this scene makes it all the more emotional for readers: the characters' inability to express their feelings makes the feelings seem stronger. The irony here is that Ruth May, by Nathan's own standard, is going to hell herself: Nathan has been so focused on the Congolese that he's neglected his duties to his own family.

Outside, Nelson is making a "funeral arch" out of leaves. Leah and her sisters pray to God for Ruth May's soul, mostly out of habit. It begins to rain, and Nathan stares out at the clouds and quotes Bible verses. Slowly, a crowd forms around the house—it's morning now, and the children of the village are awake. As it rains, the children approach Nathan. Nathan quotes Bible verses, and touches each child's head, completing the baptism ritual.

In this cathartic climax, we see all the characters at their worst and best. Nathan is just as focused on baptism as ever, but here his actions are oddly sympathetic: it's as if the universe is giving him a break from his struggle to dip the children in the river. Leah and her sisters don't believe in God much anymore, but they gather together, recognizing that they need to show some love and respect for their dead sister.

BOOK 5, CHAPTER 62

Orleanna admits that her grief will follow her wherever she goes. She once had a daughter named Ruth May, and now she doesn't. Ever since her child's death, she's been trying to "stay in motion," to help herself forget the past.

Now we can see what Orleanna has been dealing with for the decades since Ruth May's death: she blames herself for letting Ruth May go free, and may even believe that she caused her child's death. In order to escape these feelings, Orleanna must try to distract herself, and "stay in motion."

Orleanna continues talking about "staying in motion." She explains that while she tried to move, Nathan refused to move at all—he stayed stubbornly still, even while the rest of the world was changing around him. In the end, she thinks, the people who refuse to move "always lose." Whether it's the Pharaoh in Egypt, the Americans bombing Hiroshima, or the European imperialists in Africa, life moves on without them. Orleanna concludes by addressing "my little beast." She explains that life is a process of constant change. To be still is to be sorrowful.

Orleanna's point here is sobering and yet fundamentally optimistic: she's saying that the tyrants of the world, whether they're abusive fathers or imperialist rulers, will always fail in the end, because the world itself opposes their actions. People like Nathan are trying to stop their children from growing up and taking control over their own lives—but his plans are doomed. In short, change is the root of all life.

BOOK 5, CHAPTER 63

The Price family is in the process of traveling to Bulungu (it's not immediately explained why). Leah considers everything that's happened recently. Adah told her about the strange man she's seen meeting with Axelroot. Also, Leah considers the gunfire she heard in the distance a few days before.

It's not revealed why the Prices are walking through the jungle here, but by now their situation in the village has become unsustainable. They have no loyalty left to Nathan and no reason to stay around any longer.

The family proceeds to walk along the road to Bulungu. They travel light to save themselves effort. Adah has trouble walking for long periods of time, and Rachel is unusually quiet. On the walk, Leah considers why Nathan isn't traveling with the rest of the family: he refuses to abandon his post in Kilanga for any reason. In the last few months, since just before Ruth May's death, Leah has grown much closer with her mother than her father. Leah imagines Nathan back in the village, baptizing more children.

Leah fills in the picture for us: after Ruth May's death, Orleanna makes the decision to take her children out of the Congo before anything else can happen to them. Nathan stubbornly refuses to leave his post, as usual. Notably, Kingsolver doesn't show us the confrontation between Orleanna and Nathan—we're left to imagine how Nathan discovers the news that his family is leaving him.

After two days of traveling through the forest, the Prices (minus Nathan) arrive in Bulungu. They catch fevers shortly afterwards, and yet their visit to Bulungu is full of "celebration." Leah stays in a hut that belongs to a student of Anatole. While sick, she receives visitors, including Anatole. Anatole is kind and loving, and he calls Leah "beautiful."

Sometime between now and the ants crisis, Anatole seems to have developed feelings for Leah. Or perhaps he's had feelings for her all along, and only now, when Leah is free from her racist father, is he expressing these feelings.

Leah explains what happens in the following weeks. Orleanna and Adah leave Leopoldville, returning to the U.S. Nathan is still stationed in Kilanga. Rachel has left with her "devil savior," Axelroot. Anatole is taking care of Leah in the absence of her other family members. Leah has made the choice to stay with him, putting her own life in some danger.

The pacing of this chapter is faster than we've been used to, and this sets the tone for the rest of the novel. So far, we've been dealing with days, weeks, or months—from hereon out, Kingsolver will measure time in months, years, and even decades.

Anatole takes care of Leah. Leah thinks about how their "relationship" has changed lately—they sleep in the same bed, albeit "chastely." Leah is attracted to Anatole, but Anatole always laughs and teases her. He will not marry her, at least not yet. And yet Leah isn't particularly young for a bride—Anatole reminds her that many men in the Congo marry ten-year-old girls.

Leah and Anatole's relationship is unconventional in many ways, but certainly ends up being the happiest love story of the novel.

BOOK 5, CHAPTER 64

For the last year, Rachel has been living in Johannesburg, learning the Afrikaans language. Many of her new friends are French, and she enthusiastically embraces French culture.

Rachel remains an imperialist sympathizer at heart. This is shown even in her choice of language—she never bothers to learn the language of Kilanga, but embraces Afrikaans, a form of Dutch that's spoken in South Africa.

Rachel goes back to explain how she came to be in South Africa. She's now living with Eeben Axelroot, although she's technically not married to him. Axelroot isn't a particularly loyal companion—in fact, he sometimes ogles other women. Axelroot works for a mining company. They live together in a fairly large, comfortable house. Axelroot has been a talented pilot and a good diamond trader, meaning that he has no problem providing for his new wife. Rachel embraces her new life in South Africa—she treats it as a way to "start over." She often thinks that she must have "done something right," as she didn't die in the Congo, like Ruth May, after all.

Rachel is a survivor above all else: she's always looking out for herself, even if doing so endangers other people. So she's perfectly happy to run off with Axelroot. She has few opinions about Axelroot's politics; all she cares about is that Axelroot can provide for her. It's especially gruesome that Rachel can talk about her sister's death in such Darwinian terms: she acts like she was the "fitter" sister, while Ruth May died because she was weak.

Rachel remembers the day that Axelroot flew her out of the Congo in an airplane. She was so excited to leave that she can barely remember if she said goodbye to her sisters and mother. She didn't really care if she ever saw them again or not. In the airplane, Rachel suddenly remembers that she's left her knitting behind: napkins, towels, and various other things she's made by herself. She makes Axelroot promise to fly back to the Congo one day to recover these items. Rachel realizes now that she was foolish to ever believe that Axelroot would fly back. She concludes, "I guess you might say my hopes never got off the ground."

Rachel may be childish and immature, but she's also developed a lot in the last few years. She once naively believed that Axelroot was loyal to her, and would return to the Congo one day. Now, she's realistic enough to recognize Axelroot's nature. Rachel has become harsh and cynical in her thinking: she thinks of other people as means to an end, everyone competing with each other in their greed. In other words, Rachel has learned to see the world in the same way that Axelroot sees it.

BOOK 5, CHAPTER 65

Adah begins by stating that she has "decided to speak." Orleanna, by contrast, has seemingly lost all interest in communicating.

It takes a lot for Adah to say anything—so it's a real milestone for her to begin speaking normally once again.

Adah explains that she and her mother traveled back to the United States, where nobody could understand what they'd experienced in Africa. Orleanna began to work as a farmer, living alone and tending crops. At this time, Adah applied to Emory University; she rode the bus to Atlanta and interviewed well. Although Adah didn't have a traditional education, she proved herself to be a brilliant student, getting good scores on standardized tests. Shortly after returning to the U.S., Adah was accepted to Emory.

The fact that Adah is able to gain admission to Emory so easily is a testament to her own intelligence, but also to Orleanna's commitment to educating her children: she made sure that Adah and Leah continued studying during their time in the Congo, so that they'd have a way of keeping up with their peers in the U.S.

In college, Adah relished the study of zoology and genetics. She didn't communicate with her mother very often, except on occasional weekends. Adah noticed that Orleanna put a lot of love and attention into her gardening—something she never did when she was living with Nathan.

We could have predicted that Adah would end up studying biology: her thoughts on ecosystems and complex interlocking life forms shows that she has a biologist's turn of mind.

Adah backs up to explain what happened when the family left for Bulungu. Orleanna gathered her remaining daughters and told them to pack immediately, as life was no longer safe in the Congo. In Bulungu, Orleanna found a truck that would take her and Adah to Leopoldville. When the truck canceled, they were forced to walk for two days to reach the city. In Leopoldville, they were able to gain admittance to a U.N. hospital and arrange a flight back to Georgia.

As always, Orleanna is motivated, first and foremost, by what's right for her children. Ruth May's death is a wakeup call: she realizes that it was always a horrible idea to keep her family in the Congo, especially now that the country is in such chaos. In order to protect her children, Orleanna has to stand up to her husband, showing that she's overcoming some of her fears and insecurities.

When Adah returned to Georgia, she couldn't believe what she was seeing. After more than a year of living in the Congo, she couldn't process the sight of cars and straight, smooth roads. Adah noticed that her mother was now quiet and strangely calm.

Adah can tell that Orleanna is still haunted by the death of her youngest child.

Recently, Adah went through Nathan's old things, still in the family house in Georgia. She discovered that Nathan's military decorations were not, as he'd always claimed, for his bravery, but were simply for being wounded. Adah realized that Nathan ran away from danger in Bataan. Perhaps for this reason, he couldn't force himself to flee the Congo when things became too dangerous.

It would be hard for Adah's opinion of Nathan to sink any lower, but when she realizes that his reputation as a brave leader is just as bogus as his modesty and his kindness, she seems to hate him (but also to understand him) even more.

Adah thinks back to her last days in Bulungu, just before she and Orleanna left for Leopoldville. Adah was convinced that Orleanna would leave her behind and travel with Leah, but just the opposite ended up happening. Adah decides that taking her out of Africa was Orleanna's "last living act as a mother."

Adah's relationship with Orleanna has always been difficult to gauge, but she's realistic enough to recognize that Orleanna sacrificed a great deal to get Adah out of Africa alive. Adah recognizes Orleanna's love for her, even as she herself displays little real affection for her mother.

BOOK 5, CHAPTER 66

Leah now lives in a nunnery, where she's earned the nickname "the Mine Sweeper." Her husband, Anatole, has been imprisoned for a long time now. And yet she's still in love with him.

It's easy to forget that Leah is still a teenager at this point: she's been through so much so quickly that she seems to have become an adult almost overnight.

Leah explains what happened after she arrived in Bulungu with her family. She caught a horrible fever, putting her life in danger not only because of the fever itself but because she was too weak to flee from Mobutu's troops, which were marching through the Congo at the time. Anatole risked his life to protect Leah from the soldiers—something that still makes Leah feel guilty.

Anatole clearly loves Leah: otherwise, it's unlikely that he would risk his own life to protect her from Mobutu's troops. By this point, Anatole's known Leah for years and years: he knows her as well as her own parents or sisters—better, in some ways.

Leah has heard from Tata Boanda and others that Nathan hasn't been doing well lately. He lives alone in Kilanga, without a woman to cook or clean for him. He continues to preach Christianity, even though he's become increasingly ridiculed, especially after his house burned down. Why this happened isn't clear, though Leah suspects that he might have inadvertently done so himself, due to his incompetence as a cook. Boanda also told Leah that Tata Ndu was furious when he found out (from Nelson) that Tata Kuvudundu planted a snake in the chicken house.

When Orleanna and her daughters leave Kilanga, it becomes apparent just how extensively Nathan relied on his family to survive (to eat, to sleep, to have shelter, etc.), and just how absurd his pretensions of control and independence were all along. This is also when we learn that Kuvudundu was acting on his own authority in planting the snake: for all his faults, Ndu would never authorize anyone to hurt a guest in his village.

After Leah's condition improved, she and Anatole traveled to Stanleyville, where Lumumba still had popular support. There, she was mocked and despised for marrying a black man. Anatole and Leah next traveled to the Central African Republic, where they'd both be safer. It was here that a nunnery invited them to live in peace.

Although Leah recognizes that it's inappropriate for others to mock her for marrying a black man, it's also true that she's very insecure about doing exactly this. She's still feeling guilty about being white—a benefactor of centuries of oppression.

Leah has been living with the nuns for a while. She work in a hospital, treating wounds and other injuries. She's also become nearly fluent in African languages such as Lingala. Shortly after arriving at the nunnery, Anatole left for Stanleyville, where he hoped to organize a resistance group that could defeat Mobutu. Unfortunately, Anatole was arrested early on and sent to jail. Leah receives occasional letters from Leopoldville, where Anatole has been imprisoned.

We can tell that Leah is making every effort to become immersed in the culture of the Congo: her marriage to Anatole (and her white guilt) inspires her to commit to the Lumumba movement, and to embrace her new community with all sincerity. She's still living in a religious community, however.

Leah talks to one of her fellow workers, a nun named Therese. Therese claims that Leah shouldn't consider herself "involved" in the fighting in the Congo, even if her husband is, because she's a white woman, meaning that the fight is irrelevant to her. Leah resents this, but senses that Therese has a point—she's been thrown into the middle of a conflict in which white people are despised, since they're seen as imperialist aggressors.

The way this section is structured, it becomes clear that Therese is just externalizing what Leah was already thinking: that she will always be an outsider in the Congo on some level, no matter how long she lives there or who she marries. The best thing Leah can do is just to keep helping the Congolese in whatever way she can.

Leah receives news of fighting in Stanleyville. An international group of soldiers from Belgium and the U.S has arrived in the country to suppress to pro-Lumumba forces. Leah weeps for this violence, and for the memory of her imprisoned husband. She prays that Anatole will go free and give her children one day.

Even if Leah is still haunted by insecurity about her whiteness, we see here how sincere she really is in her love for the Congo and for Anatole. Leah can't atone or make up for centuries of imperialism, but she can live as truthfully and compassionately as she knows how, and so offer hope for a better future.

BOOK 5, CHAPTER 67

Marriage isn't what Rachel thought it would be. She doesn't mind life in South Africa, where there are fancy stores and delicious foods available. Nor does she mind being so far from her family (she's not even sure if her parents and sisters are alive anymore). Rather, Rachel is saddened by her relationship with Eeben Axelroot, who—she suspects—cheats on her. Axelroot mocks Rachel for being a "poor little rich girl," and he shows her little real affection.

Rachel's problems with Axelroot are both petty and poignant. She's finally married Axelroot, showing that she's really dependent on him in every way. And although Rachel is a shallow, superficial person, we can sympathize with her conundrum, because it's similar to Orleanna's: she's bound by marriage to a man she dislikes.

Rachel decides to get her revenge on Axelroot by seducing "the Ambassador," a powerful young man named Daniel. Daniel is a French attaché, married to a woman named Robine.

It's hard to gauge Rachel's behavior here: is she right to cheat on her husband? Perhaps right and wrong are beside the point here in the mercenary world of Rachel and Axelroot: Rachel is just trying to survive by any means necessary.

One evening, Rachel gets a chance to talk to Daniel alone. She tells him about her experiences in the Congo, and senses that he's attracted to her. She plans to become "Mrs. Daniel Dupree" very soon.

Rachel, for all her shallowness, knows how to use others and get what she wants. She's grown up in a different way from her sisters, but has grown up nonetheless.

BOOK 5, CHAPTER 68

Leah stands outside a train station and remembers all the things that have happened to her recently. That morning, she killed a snake that was crawling through her and Anatole's home. The date is January 17, the anniversary of the day on which the Congo lost its newfound independence and Ruth May lost her life.

Once again, Kingsolver draws an explicit parallel between the tragedies besetting the Price family ands those besetting the Congo itself.

Anatole has been released from prison and miraculously allowed to live, despite the fact that many Congolese dissidents have been executed. While in jail, Anatole made friends with his guards, and taught them how to read and write. As a gesture of thanks, they gave him the books of the politician Agistonho Neto. Neto and Anatole struck up a friendship via correspondence. Anatole sympathized with Neto's struggle as an educated, pro-Lumumba Congolese man—Neto was beaten up by the police for expressing his political views.

As usual, one of Anatole's greatest weapons is his friendliness and his gregariousness. It's this that first endears him to the Prices in the first place (especially Leah), and here it helps ensure that he's freed from prison as soon as possible. In the narrative at least, Neto is presented as a worthy successor to Patrice Lumumba: a popular, charismatic young leader who supports socialism in Africa.

After being released from prison, Anatole and Leah moved to the town of Bikoki, where Anatole lived as a child. Recently, Leah reunited with the Fowles family, who told her that one of Anatole's old students in the village, Pascal, was murdered on Christmas Day for opposing the Mobutu government. Brother Fowles also told Leah that Nathan had been continuing with his missionary efforts until very recently. Nathan was forced to leave Kilanga, however, when he became sick. As a result, nobody knows where he is now.

Pascal's death marks the passage of time in a poignant, tragic way. By the same token, it's strangely touching that even Nathan, who'd stubbornly refused to leave Kilanga to the point where he endangered his family's life, has been forced out of the community: the times really are changing.

Leah faces the truth: she's lost her family, one member at a time. She can only feel hatred for Rachel, who she believes has "sold out" by marrying a "powerful mercenary." She can't communicate with Orleanna or Adah. Her only real family nowadays is Anatole. Anatole works as a secondary school teacher. Yet Leah carries the memory of her little sister, Ruth May, deep inside her.

Leah has become increasingly political in the last few years: the catastrophe in the Congo has ensured as much. Her choice to create a new family for herself (represented by Anatole) is both tragic and inspiring: she's rebelling against the control Nathan exerted over her for so many years, but she's also forced to distance herself from her mother and sisters.

BOOK 5, CHAPTER 69

Adah is now in medical school. There, she meets a classmate who tells her that her hemiplegia shouldn't impair her mobility any longer—in other words, her limp and poor motor control are just habits, not necessary side effects of her medical condition. Adah is at first reluctant to believe this, but after many months of physical training, she begins to regain full control of her arms and legs.

It's symbolic that Adah's limited mobility was just a force of habit after so many years: perhaps this connects to the self-inflicted misery that so many women suffer under in sexist social and political structures—developing inferiority complexes that linger on even when male oppressors disappear.

Adah also reports that Leah is living in Atlanta with Anatole and their son Pascal (Adah's nephew). Adah greatly admires Anatole—they share a skepticism of American society, a distrust of parents, and a deep sense of loneliness. It occurs to Adah that everyone needs a religion. Orleanna's religion has become the Civil Rights Movement—she bravely marches on behalf of African Americans. Leah's religion is suffering, Adah believes. Rachel's religion, perhaps, is her own appearance.

It's a mark of how bad things have become in the Congo that even Leah and Anatole—who seemed totally committed to the Lumumba movement—have left altogether. It's also interesting that Orleanna has become so involved in the Civil Rights movement. Here Adah presents the idea that all the Price women have replaced Nathan's rigid Christianity with new systems of belief, as they all still seek order and meaning in their lives.

Adah admits that she rarely sees Leah and Anatole, since she's busy with medical school. She works in a hospital, delivering babies. She often thinks about how Orleanna left her behind on the night that the ants crawled through Kilanga. Once, she asked Orleanna, point-blank, why she took her to Leopoldville instead of Leah. Orleanna replied, "you were my youngest, Adah—a mother takes care of her children from the bottom up." Adah doesn't believe this for a second, though. She thinks Orleanna "chose" to take her because she needed Adah the most.

This is a difficult passage, and Kingsolver leaves it up to the reader to decide who's telling the truth. Orleanna's account of why she chose Adah is consistent with her behavior elsewhere in this book, but it's perhaps a little simplistic. By the same token, Adah's claim that Orleanna simply needed her more has some truth to it (Adah is seemingly the most practical and intelligent daughter) but also seems a little egocentric. There is no "correct" opinion here, just a multiplicity of voices.

BOOK 5, CHAPTER 70

Leah reports that the Congo has changed altogether, and all the old cities have new names. Even the country itself is now called Zaire. In Kinshana, Zaire, Leah and Anatole live with their young children, Pascal, Patrice, and Martin-Lothaire. One Easter the family receives a package, including family photos, food, and even some books. Orleanna has sent this package—she sends similar boxes all the time, but only a tiny fraction ever make it to Zaire.

Leah and Anatole are back in the Congo, and yet they're also not: the Congo has become a different country. This is a mark of how drastically the government of the country has altered in just a few years. In spite of being far from her family in Atlanta, Leah continues to receive love and comfort from Orleanna's care packages.

Leah notices an issue of the Saturday Evening Post in the package, and she knows right away that Adah must have sent it. The magazine (from 1961) contains an article about how the U.S. should control the Congo more forcefully. The article even contains a photograph of the young Mobutu. Adah has written a message for Leah, explaining that there will be a Senate investigation into the CIA's role in Lumumba's assassination. Leah also notes that Mobutu will be bringing in Muhammed Ali and George Foreman for a boxing match in Kinshana.

The Post article illustrates just how aggressively America intervened in the Congo: the idea that the U.S. should kill Lumumba and set up a dictator in the Congo was public enough to spear in the ultra-mainstream Saturday Evening Post *(even if the idea of murdering Lumumba isn't spelled out).*

We now cut to the school where Leah teaches. One of her pupils says that she's dropping out of school to "work at night." Leah sadly notes that there are no laws against prostitution in the country. Another student brings up the upcoming Ali-Foreman fight, and Leah can't help but point out that it's absurd that millions of people around the world will watch the match without realizing how underpaid and malnourished the people of Zaire really are.

Leah's bitterness about the famous "Rumble in the Jungle" between Ali and Foreman is another example of how the U.S. used the media to obscure the brutality of its intervention in Africa.

On her own, Leah thinks about her options for the future. She and her family could stay in the country, or they could move back to Atlanta. Although she's poor and can barely provide for her children, Leah recognizes that she's far luckier and better off than her neighbors.

Despite how deeply ingrained she has become in the life and culture of the Congo, Leah still recognizes that her whiteness, (relative) wealth, and American heritage give her undeniable advantages—she can always just leave the country if things get too bad, while others can't.

Anatole tells Leah that the Congo has fallen on hard times, even by the country's low standards. The Congo, he explains, was like a beautiful princess in a fairy tale—always being controlled and dominated by angry, powerful men. Now, the Congo is in an uneasy "marriage" to the United States, which preaches about the country's "progress" while stealing its resources. Leah responds, "I understand that kind of marriage all right. I grew up witnessing one just like it."

This is one of the best examples of the equivalence Kingsolver draws between misogyny and imperialism, and between feminism and anti-colonialism. The suggestion would seem to be that Leah's experiences with an abusive father give her some insight into (although certainly not total understanding of) the struggle of the Congolese against their Belgian and American oppressors.

Leah has taken on a new identity in Kinshasa. She's now Mrs. Ngemba, a schoolteacher. Many of the students mock Leah for being white and different. Others are the children of powerful American businessmen who've come to work in Zaire—and these children also ridicule Leah. Downtown, Leah watches TV and sees Mobutu preaching about the "purity" and "unity" of the nation. An audience cheers for him, but Leah senses that the audience has been paid or threatened to cheer. In the bar where the TV is playing, none of the drinkers pay attention. Leah ends the chapter by explaining that she quit her teaching job after a year.

Leah has become a perpetual outsider beyond the confines of her own family. The white students mock Leah for marrying a black man and acting like an anti-colonial revolutionary, while the African students will always see her as connected to their oppressors, however tangentially. These feelings of racial solidarity correspond to the speech Mobutu is making on TV: a speech about the importance of race in Zaire. The lack of enthusiasm for Mobutu is a tragic contrast to the past hopefulness and passion regarding Lumumba.

BOOK 5, CHAPTER 71

Fairy tales, Rachel begins, are nonsense—nobody ever talks about what happens after the "happily ever after." For a time, Rachel was a diplomat's wife—taken care of, well dressed, etc. At first Rachel enjoyed this new marriage, but eventually she grew bored and sad. Then she learned that her husband was cheating on her with a mistress, for whom he left Rachel. Rachel is now on her third husband—an older man named Remy Fairley. Remy is kind and devoted to Rachel. He then dies abruptly and leaves Rachel the Equatorial, a hotel for businessmen.

Rachel is now a grown woman, and a surprisingly cynical, experienced one. For all her superficiality, she's seen plenty of the world: she's been married three times, seen her family members die, and more. And yet Rachel's takeaway seems to be that survival is the only morality: she feels little to no guilt at having abandoned her husbands so quickly, nor does she seem to love really Remy, although he loves her.

Rachel is now the owner and runner of the Equatorial hotel. She takes pride in remodeling and organizing the building, particularly the spectacular pool that attracts visitors from far away. But Rachel sometimes thinks about her sisters. They never visit her, even though some (Leah) aren't very far away at all. She imagines her sisters surveying her hotel. Leah would compliment her hospitality, while Adah would drolly compliment her "personal hygiene." Rachel tells herself that Leah and Adah have avoided her because they don't want to admit that Rachel has finally become a capable woman.

It's pretty obvious that Rachel is still desperate for validation from her family. Here, Rachel wants her sisters to praise her ingenuity—in essence, to admit that Rachel turned out to be pretty bright and successful after all. While this is partly true—running a hotel is more than most people ever accomplish, and is especially admirable for a woman growing up in such a sexist environment as Rachel—her success seems to have brought her little happiness.

BOOK 5, CHAPTER 72

Anatole is in prison once again, Leah begins—he's been arrested for his defiance of Mobutu, as well as for his education. Leah tries to understand what her life will be like from now on. Pascal, her son, is now a teenager. He remembers the previous years, when they all lived in Atlanta. Leah herself is nostalgic for this time—Adah was in medical school then, and Orleanna was very kind to Leah and Pascal.

Time is flying along within the narrative, and Leah's son is about the same age Leah was when the novel began. In spite of her guilt at having left Zaire for Atlanta, Leah is also extremely nostalgic for her time in the U.S., when she and her husband both felt safe, free, and hopeful.

Leah's children have all seen Atlanta, and love it. Coming back from one visit, Anatole's passport was confiscated at the airport. Anatole believed that he'd receive his passport in the mail in a few days, but instead, he was placed in detention for treason—this would probably result in a life in prison. Anatole will be placed in the same prison where Lumumba was imprisoned years before.

The parallels being drawn here between Anatole and Lumumba aren't very comforting—it's strongly implied that Anatole is going to die in prison, just as Lumumba did.

Leah is extremely lonely now. She takes care of her children in Anatole's absence, but can't shake the sense that they don't really need her. She tries to forget her heartache by staying busy. She writes letters to Anatole, reporting on her children's health. She also writes letters to Adah, explaining her sadness. Leah envies Adah for her freedom and individuality—Adah has no lovers or children to whom she's attached. (Leah also mentioned that Adah has become a world-class expert on tropic epidemiology.)

Leah goes through the same insecurities that Orleanna experienced years before: she's afraid that she can't do anything for her children. This feeling of powerlessness is also apparent in other parts of her life: in school, she can't fight the feeling that nothing she does is going to make a difference to her pupils. It's enough to make us wonder if Adah isn't the happiest of the Prices—the only one to escape the cycle of dependency.

BOOK 5, CHAPTER 73

Rachel has agreed to a reunion with her sisters, but she's nervous about it. Rachel has been in contact with Leah, who reports that the government is, unexpectedly, going to let Anatole out of jail within a month. To pass time in the month before this event, Leah wants to spend time with her sisters.

It's again almost miraculous that the government is letting Anatole out of jail, as just a few pages ago, it had seemed that they were going to execute him as they executed Lumumba years before.

The sisters meet in Senegal, and proceed to travel through Cameroon, Gabon, and other countries. Before she describes the trip in detail, Rachel notes that at the end of the month, Leah reunited with Anatole—she embraced Anatole with palpable love and tenderness, and then drove back to Kinshana.

Leah remains loyal to Anatole after all these years: in spite of her desire to return to Atlanta, she loves her husband too much to abandon him when he needs her.

The trip through West Africa, Rachel reports, is tough. Rachel bickers with Leah constantly. Rachel wants to stay in upscale places, while Leah wants somewhere cheaper. Rachel argues that Lumumba and his followers are "followers of Karl Marx," a proposition that Leah finds absurd and childish. Undeterred, Rachel claims that Reagan will keep the country safe from Communism. Leah lectures Rachel about Lumumba's past—he was a democratically elected leader, and a proponent of socialist economic policies. He was replaced with Mobutu, a dictator who happened to subscribe to capitalism.

Rachel seems to have internalized all the propaganda of the U.S.—she fervently believes that the U.S. is a universally benevolent force for democracy and freedom. Unfortunately, it's hard to continue believing these things when you consider everything the U.S. did around the world during the Cold War: the dictatorships sponsored, the democratically elected leaders assassinated, etc.

The sisters travel through the palaces of Abomey, where they're struck to learn that the King of Abomey had dozens of wives. This reminds Rachel of her three husbands. Leah and Adah begin to talk about Nathan. Adah claims that she got word that Nathan was in Lusambo five years ago, before returning to Kilanga. Leah claims that Nathan is dead, but doesn't say how she knows this. Leah also reports that she's heard of the death of Tata Kuvudundu—he spent the final years of his life in disgrace for what he did with the snake.

Rachel interprets the palaces as a counterpart to her own prosperity. Leah and Adah are more thoughtful: they take the palace as a reminder of misogyny, sexism, and patriarchy at its worst. This is also an important passage because it reminds us that Kuvudundu was just as hated in his own community as he was among the Prices.

The sisters proceed in silence for a few hours. Then Leah begins talking about Nathan again. Reverend Fowles has told Leah that "Tata Prize" (as Nathan is now known) had a long white beard, and was rumored to be capable of turning himself into a crocodile that attacks children. Some said that he had five wives. A few years ago, he was blamed for causing the death of a group of children. Their boat overturned, throwing them into a crocodile-infested river. Nathan was burned for this "crime." Leah cries as she tells Rachel and Adah this information.

Nathan's death is both tragic and ironic: it's strangely inevitable that Nathan was blamed for children getting eaten by crocodiles; he was so obsessed with baptism that someone would inevitably come to believe that he was trying to feed children to crocodiles on purpose. Leah continues to be the daughter who feels closest to Nathan, even if by know she had lost all respect for him.

Rachel tries to comfort Leah. She tells Leah that while Leah loved Nathan more than Nathan's other daughters, Nathan was an awful man. Leah, still crying, claims to know this—Fowles told her that at the end of his life, Nathan was still promising to baptize every child in Kilanga, even though the villagers interpreted this promise as a threat.

Leah knows now that Nathan was an evil man, but just because she recognizes this fact doesn't mean that she can't weep for him.

The sisters move on to talk about politics in Zaire. Leah continues talking about Mobutu's tyranny, and Rachel shouts at Leah for telling a "sob story." Adah and Leah keep talking about the murders that the U.S. has sponsored in Zaire in recent years. Rachel insists that the U.S. would never promote murder, since "Thou shalt not kill" is a part of the Bible. This makes Adah and Leah chuckle—together, they salute Nathan, "the Minister of Poisonwood." Suddenly, Adah realizes something—Nathan's legendary "five wives" must have been a reference to the rest of his family: Orleanna, Ruth May, Adah, Leah, and Rachel.

Rachel still refuses to accept the truth about what her country has done to the Congo. This reminds us of how differently Rachel, Adah, and Leah have grown since Ruth May's death: this catastrophe set them off in wildly different directions. We also get another reference to "balanga," the word for both "good" and "poisonwood." Nathan thought he was doing God's work, but really he was almost always acting immorally.

BOOK 5, CHAPTER 74

Adah notes that Rachel is secretly remorseful for Nathan's untimely death. Adah travels back to Georgia and tells Orleanna about Nathan. In response, Orleanna just walks outside for a while, silent. This prompts Adah to consider the direction Orleanna's life has taken. She worked as a volunteer in Atlanta for years, and now lives on the Georgia coast.

Orleanna has been a continent away from Nathan for many years now, and when she learns that he has finally died, she doesn't display much emotion. She seems to have killed off any emotional connection to him years ago, perhaps when Ruth May died.

Once, Adah talks to her mother about regaining her mobility. Orleanna tells Adah she's glad that Adah can walk and talk normally now. Adah finds this a little uncomfortable—the Western world is too quick to condemn and pity the deformed and the sick, rather than respect their bodies for unique forms of beauty.

Adah lives in the U.S., but she hardly conforms to U.S. dogma in the way that Rachel does. On the contrary, she finds fault in the U.S.'s emphasis on purity, health, and perfection: overall she has grown into a progressive and brilliant woman.

When Adah returns to Georgia from Africa, she sees Orleanna right away. She reports that Leah and Rachel are doing all right—Leah is thin, and Rachel has barely changed. Adah tells Orleanna that Nathan died "in a blaze of glory," just the way he would have wanted, and Orleanna replies, "I don't give a damn what he would have wanted." Orleanna tells Adah that not a single woman in Georgia has ever asked her how Ruth May died, or about Nathan the "crazy evangelist." Adah only says, "I despised him. He was a despicable man." Orleanna praises Adah for "always calling a spade a spade." Adah senses that she'll always be "a crooked little person trying to tell the truth" inside. She also notes that she used to fantasize about burning Nathan to death.

Adah, no less than Orleanna, will never entirely escape the memory of her own past. Just as Orleanna will always remember the death of her child and the years of abuse she experienced with Nathan, Adah will never entirely escape the memories of her hemiplegia. And much as Orleanna has chosen to accept her past rather than reject it altogether, Adah chooses to embrace her former self as well. Apparently Adah continues to feel no connection whatsoever for her father, even long after his death (by literal burning).

BOOK 5, CHAPTER 75

Leah now has four children: Pascal, Patrice, Martin-Lothaire, and Nathaniel. Each son is named after a man who died suddenly. Nathaniel, her youngest child, was born last year, shortly after Anatole was released from jail. Pascal, the eldest child, studies engineering in Luanda. Patrice is quiet and tender, and looks a lot like Anatole. He reminds Leah of Adah.

Leah's decision to name one of her children after Nathaniel demonstrates that, for better or worse, Nathan continues to be a huge influence on Leah's life. It's also interesting that Leah, who was one of four sisters, now has four sons.

Leah remembers how, ten years ago, it briefly seemed like the tribes of Angola would finally find peace under the leadership of Agostinho Neto. But within two weeks of Neto's rise to power, the U.S. armed Neto's opposition, ensuring a violent, bloody war that ended in Neto's defeat. Some, like Rachel, would call Leah brainwashed for believing this, but Leah knows she's right. She thinks back to the definition of Communism that Anatole gave her years and years ago: "they think everybody should have the same kind of house." Leah's current house is full of food, books, and children. Ten years after Neto's defeat to the U.S.-sponsored opposition, it seems like the U.S. is finally losing its control of the greater Congolese area.

There's little upside to the history of the Congo at this time. While the U.S. seems to be pulling out of the greater Congolese area, violence and political turmoil continue to wreak havoc upon the area. Leah and Anatole haven't exactly succeeded in protecting their country, but they've succeeded in loving one another and building a happy family.

BOOK 6, CHAPTER 76

Rachel is now fifty years old, and still running her hotel, the Equatorial. Sometimes, she can't help but think about the life she would have had if she lived in the U.S. She would have grown up slower, she thinks—certainly there's no way she would have ended up the owner of a major hotel in her early twenties.

In one way, Rachel's superficiality and cynicism is a blessing: unlike the other Prices, she's not haunted by the scars of her past life. In this chapter, Kingsolver will delve a little deeper into Rachel's psychology to test whether she's truly any better-off than her siblings.

In spite of her doubts about life in the U.S., Rachel decides to move back to America. She's nervous about returning home, and thinks of the Vietnam veterans who returned from war to find the country full of hippies. She also notes that her marriage to Axelroot has given her "female problems" and made her unable to have children.

Rachel, we see, has scars of her own—far more literal ones than Orleanna or Leah, too. Her venereal disease is a symbol of the time in her life when she was wholly dependent on Axelroot to survive, and a time when she didn't have any choice but to have sex with him. In this way, Rachel is carrying a constant reminder of the misogyny and abuse she endured in both America and Africa.

Rachel takes stock of Africa—"you don't have to like it, but you sure have to admit it's out there." She offers "advice"—let other people do the hard work, and just "ride along." This is the best way to survive, especially in a "non-Christian kind of place" like Africa.

In the end, Rachel comes to a rather depressing conclusion: the only purpose of life is to survive and take care of yourself. Rachel will never have children of her own, thanks to Axelroot, so nothing she does will ever challenge her worldview. This is a rather depressing way to end Rachel's story: she's always been selfish, and she still is at the age of 50.

BOOK 6, CHAPTER 77

It's been thirty years since Leah gave birth to her first child. She lies in bed with Anatole, talking about the "history of the world." When the Portuguese first came to Africa, Anatole tells Leah, they were amazed by the Africans' riches, but dismayed by the lack of agriculture in place. Leah enjoys hearing these stories, even though she's heard them many times before. Over time, the Portuguese learn how to cross the wide rivers of the Congo, interfering with the lives of the people on the other side.

We get the sense that Leah and Anatole have had this conversation with each other hundreds of times. The fact that they can continue to talk about the same things again and again reminds us how much pleasure Anatole and Leah take in each other's company, and how equal and loving their relationship has always been.

For ten years, Leah and Anatole have lived in Angola on an agricultural station. Angola is now an independent state. The village where Leah lives reminds her uncannily of Kilanga, and when she first arrived, she kept on expecting to see her old friends there. Her life in the village is hard but rewarding. She has to work hard to farm and grow crops.

Leah and Anatole's way of life in Angola is hard but ultimately better than Rachel's: where Rachel savors her material wealth, but has no one to share her happiness with, Anatole and Leah take pleasure in each other's company, and in raising a family together.

Leah often thinks about her father. If she could tell Nathan one thing, she would offer him, "the simple human relief of knowing you've done wrong, and living through it." Nathan, she can now see so clearly, was just one of the millions of men who refused to be wrong about anything. She thinks of her children, who are a dusty "silt color," and decides "time erases whiteness altogether."

Leah, out of all her siblings, seems to find peace in the simplest of ways: she forgives her father for what he did to her. It could certainly be argued that it's easiest for Leah to forgive Nathan because he didn't treat her as badly as he treated his wife and other children. But perhaps it's also fair to say that Leah's experiences in the last few decades—her decision to wait for Anatole, to nurture a family, etc.—have taught her that forgiveness and compassion is the quickest road to happiness. It's also important to note here that Leah's white guilt has lessened with the birth of her children—she is doing her own small part to make right the wrongs of colonialism and oppression.

BOOK 6, CHAPTER 78

Adah has become a successful doctor in Atlanta. She contemplates her Hippocratic oath—the oath that binds her to protect human life. Her colleagues recently accused her of cynicism for some of her actions as a medical researcher, but we're not told which actions these were.

The question now becomes: if Leah attains happiness by finding a family with Anatole, how does Adah, her identical twin, find happiness? (Or does she?) It would seem that Adah takes greatest pleasure in her research and her work: science gives her a constant pleasure of discovery.

Adah offers a "creation story"—"God is a virus, God is an ant." In other words, God is in all living things. The processes that most humans regard as hideous and frightening, such as forest fires, or the spread of AIDS and the Ebola virus, are in reality just cleansing activities, necessary to keep the Earth healthy.

Interestingly, Adah, who's always been the most dismissive of Nathan's Christianity, seems to be gravitating toward an almost religious view of the world: she sees a sacredness in all forms of life, and a cosmic balance in even the most chaotic of activities.

As a medical researcher, Adah has been researching rare African viruses. She's good at her work because she's not frightened of viruses—she thinks of them as her friends and kindred spirits. Some of her colleagues regard this as a cynical point of view, but in fact it's a very beautiful one. Adah studies viruses with respect, and her respect for her subjects has made her an important AIDS researcher, honored with many awards.

Adah's worldview is very unusual to some people. Where most would see tragedy in death, Adah sees a balance: for every animal that dies, another one survives. Because Adah doesn't moralize her research, but rather surveys both viruses and human beings with objective attention, she's very successful in her field.

Adah visits Orleanna once a month. Orleanna is quite old now, and suffers from several diseases she contracted in the Congo, such as tuberculosis. Adah is close with her mother, but doesn't have any lovers. She's had some in the past, but she can never force herself to get close to them, as they don't understand her past. Adah continues to regard her former self—i.e., her body when she was suffering from hemiplegia—as an important part of her identity, one which no lover has ever been able to understand.

As the novel draws to a close, Kingsolver confronts the question of how her female characters deal with trauma, abuse, and misogyny. Adah, much like Orleanna, seems unwilling to forget the past: because she doesn't moralize about "good" and "bad" bodies, she has a genuine nostalgia for her old, disabled self. This is laudable, but also rather sad—it's cut her off from the kind of love that gives her identical twin so much happiness.

In the end, Adah thinks of Nathan as an important influence on her life—the provider of half of her DNA, after all. And yet she fully recognizes that Nathan was a hypocrite and a fool, who promoted a flawed morality, a "Poisonwood Bible."

Adah's sense of balance extends even to Nathan, the man she's spent most of her life hating. So in a way, Adah forgives Nathan in much the same that Leah does: she recognizes that Nathan, in spite of his hypocrisy and foolishness, made her who she is today.

BOOK 7

An unnamed narrator says, "I am no little beast." She claims to represent all of Africa—every dead child in the continent. She addresses "Mother," and tells her to be still. She describes a scene: Orleanna leading her four children—including the youngest, Ruth May—through a forest, until their movements disturb an okapi. The narrator explains that because of the family's visit, the okapi runs away and ends up living through the rest of the year—if it had stayed, it would have been shot by a hunter soon after. The narrator says, "Being dead is not worse than being alive. It is different, though."

We can guess, from the way that Orleanna has always addressed Ruth May as a "little beast," that this is Ruth May we're hearing from. And yet this seems impossible: Ruth May has been dead for decades. Gradually, we come to see that Ruth May is speaking from beyond the grave: she seems to live in a universe much like the one Adah believes in, where death and life are locked in an eternal balance. Ruth May also shows us how the okapi's life was actually improved by Orleanna's encounter with it: this would suggest that even seemingly insignificant events actually have important outcomes. Again, this seems to support Adah's belief in a big, complex system of relationships where every tiny thing plays its part.

The narrator describes another scene—Orleanna leads her three children through a market. They have come to say goodbye to Ruth May, but also to say goodbye to Orleanna, who's quite old, herself. The narrator reports that the children love Orleanna "inordinately."

The knowledge that Orleanna's children love her deeply is touching, in part, because the Price daughters have said remarkably little about their mother over the course of this book. To hear, after all this time, that they truly appreciate Orleanna, is reassuring, especially because Orleanna was always afraid that her children didn't really care about her at all.

The family travels through the market. The narrator explains that they're planning to travel back to Kilanga soon to see their sister's grave, where Orleanna wants to place a special grave marker. As the women walk through the market, the narrator tells us that Mobutu is lying in bed, dying of cancer.

Mobutu's death from cancer is another big transition at the end of the book: in spite of the decay of the Congo over time, Mobutu's tyranny is coming to an end, validating Orleanna's philosophy that all tyrants eventually lose their battles for control.

The women eventually see a woman sitting against a large wall. She's about the same age as Orleanna's three daughters, though she's much larger. This large woman offers to sell the women toys for their children, and Orleanna buys a few toys. The woman then offers Orleanna something else—a small wooden okapi.

It's suggested that this woman is a kind of surrogate for Ruth May herself (she's about the age Ruth May would be), and the presence of okapi adds a magical element to the scene, as if Ruth May is speaking from beyond the grave, trying to remind her mother of the day, so long ago, when she saw the mysterious animal.

One of the women asks the large woman if she's heard any news of Kilanga, the town where they're headed. The large woman replies that no such village exists—there's nothing there but jungle, and always has been. Confused, the women turn away from the large woman.

In this tragic revelation, all knowledge of Kilanga has been wiped out by the chaos and tyranny of the Congo's recent years. It's as if the Prices' past was all a kind of dream—but perhaps this is also a symbol of the Price women leaving their emotional baggage behind.

Orleanna sees a man who's about the age that Ruth May would be if she'd survived her snakebite. As Orleanna thinks about this, the narrator explains that she's calculating "how old I would be now." Now addressing Orleanna as "mother," the narrator tells Orleanna that she, Orleanna, will never forget her family, no matter how old she becomes. The narrator tells Orleanna, "Move on. Walk forward into the light."

Throughout the novel, Orleanna has struggled to both remember and to forget. Here, at the end of the book, Ruth May tells us that Orleanna will always remember her family. And yet Ruth May is also telling her mother to stop fixating on Ruth May's own tragic, untimely death: i.e., to stop blaming herself. Taken in the broadest sense, this is a fitting way to end the book: Ruth May is speaking to her entire family, urging them to forget the sexism and tyranny that's caused them so much misery, and to "keep moving" (as Orleanna said), to go forward with their lives.

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